



TRAVIS BAGWELL  
**AWAKEN  
ONLINE**

**SIDE QUEST : RETRIBUTION**

# Awaken Online

## Side Quest: Retribution

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Travis Bagwell

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Seriously, my wife comes up with all the good ideas.

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# Foreword

Hello there! Before you launch into this book, I wanted to mention up front that this story takes places after the end of the second book in the *Awaken Online Series*, [AO: Precipice](#). If you haven't read the other books yet, you may feel a tad lost since I didn't devote much time to bringing brand-new readers up to speed.

If you have read the other books, then this will be an interesting change of pace. This novel is actually the culmination of a side project I started last year as a way to flesh out the world. It follows Riley and the quest she received in book two. I have used it as an opportunity to explore other parts of the game in a way that is difficult to show through Jason's exploits alone. Expect new characters, new locations, as well as plenty of badassery and mayhem. Trust me, you won't be disappointed.

Now that the administrative stuff is out of the way, enjoy the book!

*May the darkness claim you. – The Dark One*

# Chapter 1 - Reviled

Riley pumped her legs hard as her cleats dug into the thick, grassy turf of the field. Her breath came in short, ragged gasps, sending puffs of vapor into the chill morning air. She held her lacrosse stick firmly as she ran – knuckles white around the lightweight metal shaft.

She could see two opposing players approaching her down the field. Their eyes focused on her through the grills of their helmets as they charged forward. She feinted to the left, causing one of the opposing players to go wide. She then pivoted and darted to the right. However, the other player was waiting for her.

Riley felt the metal rod of the player's stick slam into her shin. She tumbled forward as the world spun around her. She landed hard on her shoulder with a grunt, and the wind rushed from her lungs. As Riley lay on the ground gasping for air, she saw the ball roll out of her net.

"You should stay down, slut," a voice hissed at her. A shadow fell over her prone form, and she couldn't quite make out the other player looming above her. Snickers came from her other teammates nearby.

"Okay girls," the coach called from the sidelines. "Someone help Riley up, and we'll run that play again."

No one offered a helping hand to Riley, and the other girls on her team stepped back into position. Once she caught her breath, Riley slowly pushed herself to her feet and glanced around the field. Her eyes followed the figure of the girl who had tripped her. Carrie Summers. This wasn't the first time Riley had "accidentally" ended up on the ground in the last couple of weeks, and she expected it wouldn't be the last.

"What was that about?" her coach asked, approaching her from the side of the field. "Are you okay?" Riley could see a worried look in the woman's eyes.

*Not worried enough to punish Carrie for tripping me,* she thought bitterly.

"It's nothing, Coach," Riley replied, brushing the dirt and grass off her practice uniform. She could feel a dull ache in her shoulder, and her shin felt like it was on fire. Pulling down the edge of her sock, she could see a large red welt forming. Riley tried putting some

weight on the leg, and it promptly buckled.

Her coach moved forward to assist her, but Riley waved her off. "That looks bad," the older woman said, giving her an odd look at the rebuff. "Why don't you go see the nurse?"

Riley didn't bother to respond. She nodded curtly and limped her way off the field. As she passed the other girls, she could hear their murmurings and felt their eyes on her back. She kept her head down, solely focusing on getting to the nearby gym. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing her break.

"Try not to get knocked up on the way to the nurse," Carrie sneered. Riley gritted her teeth but stayed quiet, passing the other girl without making eye contact. Fighting back just made it worse. If they saw that they were getting to her, that would likely just ramp up the abuse.

She made her way slowly into the locker room, shed her practice uniform, and then moved into the shower. The locker room reeked of deodorant and perfume, but even those smells were lost to the overwhelming musty stench of sweat, water, and mildew.

As the warm water rained down on her, Riley balanced precariously on one leg and tried to think of something positive. Nothing came to mind except an image of a few of her digital arrows embedded in those nasty girls' throats. Inside AO, she wouldn't have to put up with this kind of abuse.

*Jason might be having a bad influence on me, she thought. I guess that's the beauty of AO. I get to act on my impulses, and the damage isn't permanent.*

She finished up in the shower and threw on a t-shirt and jeans, being careful not to graze her shin. She wasn't in any hurry. It was still early, and classes hadn't started yet. The nurse probably wouldn't show up for another fifteen minutes or so. As she mindlessly packed up her things, Riley gingerly pressed at the welt. She didn't think anything was broken or fractured, but it wouldn't hurt to have it checked out.

Heading toward Richmond's main campus building, her progress was slowed by her lopsided gait. The red brick structure loomed in front of her, casting a long shadow on the concrete sidewalk as the sun peaked over the horizon. As soon as she left the gym, Riley shivered at the change in temperature. She rubbed at her bare arms to create friction in an attempt to stay warm. Now that she wasn't running on the field, she realized it was pretty cold out, and she had left her sweater in her locker.

October wasn't generally lacrosse season, but Richmond's team was legendary in their district. They had won the state championships for the last three years running. With that reputation came the need to



endlessly practice – even during the off season. She grumbled under her breath about the stupidity of school pride as she limped toward the main school building. Regardless it was one of the few things about school that she enjoyed.

Once inside, she made her way to the nurse's station near the front of the school, eyeing the administrative office carefully. She was keeping a lookout for the Vice Principal, Ms. Abrams. She hated that woman, not only for her treatment of Jason but her cold disdain for practically everyone that stepped foot in her office. Luckily, Riley made it into the school clinic without running into anyone. The building was still nearly deserted.

As she walked into the small room, the smell of alcohol and disinfectant assaulted Riley's nose. That was one of the big differences between AO and the real world; the smells were so much more vibrant here. It was one of the few things that still allowed her to distinguish between the real world and the game. Maybe Cerillion Entertainment hadn't mastered programming smells yet, and for that she was thankful. She had witnessed some terrible things in-game, but there was something more visceral and real about including the smell.

"Hey there, Riley. What brings you in so early?" A plump woman walked into view, a wide smile on her face. Then her eyes dropped to Riley's limp, and a frown creased her lips.

"Hi, Ms. Collins," Riley said. "Coach told me to come see you about my leg. I... I guess I had an accident."

Ms. Collins grimaced and patted the exam table beside her. "Well, why don't you take a seat and we'll give you a once-over."

With a grimace of pain, Riley hobbled over to the table and jumped up. Ms. Collins tapped a console sitting nearby and took a seat on a rolling stool. A glowing blue control panel was projected into the air before her, and the nurse tapped out a few commands on a translucent keyboard.

"Turn to the pedestal please," Ms. Collins ordered. Riley obliged, shifting on the table so that her leg was facing the mobile pedestal beside the nurse. A faint beam of blue light shot from the tower, scanning up and down Riley's leg for a few seconds. The screen before Ms. Collins shifted, showing an image of the bones of Riley's leg.

"Well, nothing is broken," Ms. Collins said in a distracted voice as she reviewed the information on the screen. "I guess that's some relief." She motioned at Riley's shin. "Why don't you roll up your jeans and let me take a closer look?"

Riley obliged her, delicately folding the leg of her pants up until it sat at her knee. As her shin came into view, Ms. Collins drew in a sharp breath. Bruises riddled Riley's leg in a series of dark purple

blotches that discolored her skin. A red line was also visible where Carrie's stick had most recently struck her.

"What happened here?" Ms. Collins asked, her eyes darting from Riley's leg to meet her eyes. "I thought you played lacrosse, not soccer."

Riley glanced away. "More accidents," she muttered. "I'm just clumsy. The coach has been pushing us hard lately. I guess I just didn't notice."

Ms. Collins scoffed, her eyes angry and disbelieving. "Yeah, right. More likely a bunch of spiteful girls were trying to make a point." She shook her head. "You should report this to the principal or your coach."

"There's nothing to report," Riley replied in a quiet but firm tone. What was she supposed to do? Tattle on the girls on her team for tripping her? Tell the administration about the whispered names when they passed in the hallway or the jeers she received in the locker room? That would only make it worse.

"Is this about Alex?" Ms. Collins asked cautiously, her gentle hands pressing gingerly around the welt on Riley's shin. Riley glanced up at her sharply. "What? I'm not completely out of touch. I hear a few rumors from the students and teachers," Ms. Collins added with a sympathetic smile.

"I bet you do," Riley replied sullenly.

The woman patted her knee gently. "And I don't believe half of them. I was your age once. People can be vindictive and cruel. Especially when you break up with our school's *golden boy*." She uttered the words *golden boy* with a hint of disdain.

Riley didn't respond immediately. It was more than that. Alex hadn't posted the video footage he had of her; Riley's father had made certain of that. However, he had still been able to use more mundane means to retaliate after she blew his head off. Alex had immediately started spreading rumors, and those had taken off like wildfire, spurred on by jealous girls who couldn't believe that Riley would have broken up with someone as *amazing* as Alex.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," Riley replied evenly.

Ms. Collins chuckled. "I didn't realize you'd suffered a head injury too! Maybe I need to re-scan you." Then her smile faded, and she looked at Riley with a more serious expression. "Well, if you do decide you need someone to talk to, you can always come to me."

Ms. Collins' compassion just made Riley angrier. There was nothing that the portly nurse could do to fix her situation. Riley had made this mess herself, and she didn't regret it. She would never be pressed under someone's thumb like that again, and she had done the right thing by standing up for Jason. This was just the fallout for her

own stupid mistakes.

"I'm fine. Really," Riley said. She tugged the leg of her pants down and jumped up, putting most of her weight on her good leg.

"I beg to differ," Ms. Collins' replied, causing Riley to glance at her in confusion. The nurse chuckled lightly. "I'm talking about your leg," she added, motioning to Riley's limp. "I might not be able to help you with your other problems, but I can get you out of class for the day."

"That's really not necessary," Riley began, but Ms. Collins waved her objection away, her free hand dancing across the console in front of her.

"It's already done," the nurse replied. "You, my dear, are excused for the day, and I've called you a car to get you home. Just remember to keep your leg elevated and ice those bruises. That should reduce the swelling."

Riley stared at the woman for a moment, and then her gaze dropped to the floor. "Thank you," she said softly. A feeling of relief washed over her. At least she could get away from the torment for a little while.

"Not a problem, Riley," Ms. Collins replied. "Like I said, don't hesitate to come to me if you need someone to talk to or even just to vent. I know that can help."

Riley nodded and started toward the door. Ms. Collins was right about one thing. She did need to blow off some steam. She just didn't plan to do it by ranting to her school nurse – however sympathetic she might be. Riley had discovered a much more cathartic way to deal with her frustration.

## Chapter 2 - Cathartic

Spinning to the left, Riley avoided a whirling metal blade. She dove forward into a roll, narrowly passing under another blade operated by the machine beside her. As she danced, dodged, and spun in a mindless flurry of movement, she could hear the creak of wood and metal. Riley navigated the gruesome obstacle course in the training room beneath Jerry's inn with an ease that evidenced her long hours of practice.

She loved this room, particularly the whirring wooden machines around her. It was the creaking grumble the gears made as the dummy spun and the muted, musty smell of aging wood that lingered in the room. Her arm lashed out, a dagger intercepting a blade aimed at her abdomen and causing the machine to stop momentarily. She palmed the metal, flipping over the arm and out of the reach of the other dummy that was approaching behind her. Riley's feet hit the hard-wood floor with a soft thump on the other side.

When she ran this obstacle course, there was no room to dwell on her problems. She was forced to give herself up to the moment and act purely on instinct. Her mind went blank, and she just *acted*.

The exercise forced her to focus on something other than the anger and frustration she had experienced at school earlier that day and the many days before it. Between that and the chill of the dark mana that pulsed through her veins, she felt almost normal – like the person she had been only a few weeks ago.

As the next blade swept at her, she ducked again. Stepping in close, she slammed her dagger into the target painted near the base of the machine. The wood splintered under the blow, and the machines in the room creaked to a sudden halt.

Riley stood there for a moment, breathing calmly and staring at the blade. A part of her wanted to keep going, and her dark mana egged her on. She wanted to pound her daggers into the wood again and again. Her fingers tensed around the hilt of the remaining weapon at her waist, her muscles tight and ready to spring.

A slow clap sounded from behind her. Startled, Riley spun, hurling her dagger through the air towards the source of the noise. Jerry caught the blade between two fingers, looking at it with wide eyes as though he was surprised he had caught the object. He glanced at her, a wide grin crossing his bleached lips.

The innkeeper bowed deeply, flicking the tip of his big floppy

hat with his finger. "Greetings, mademoiselle," Jerry said politely. "You've improved since we last sparred. Must be all that frantic *hands-on* experience you picked up in the north."

Then his lips pinched into a thin line, his finger curling his mustache as he examined the blade in his hand. "Although, now that I think about it, you do seem a bit on edge. Something troubling you?" He approached Riley and handed the dagger back to her with a small bow.

Riley grimaced and accepted the blade. She would normally feel guilty for throwing a dagger at someone, but she had about as much chance of harming Jerry as killing a dragon. The thief was supernaturally fast. She had only managed to nick his hat once and had promptly been sent flying into a wall.

"Just a bunch of stuff that I don't want to talk about," Riley responded gruffly. She turned and yanked her other blade from the wooden machine, admiring the deep groove she had carved into the surface.

"So, you plan to take it out on my innocent equipment instead?" Jerry asked good-naturedly. "Do you know how difficult it is to repair my secret little training center?"

"I expect you just hire someone," Riley said dryly, wiping her blades clean with a spare cloth on a table near the training arena and then sheathing them.

Jerry sighed. "Yes, but then I have to kill them. It's a terrible waste, but I can't let my secrets getting out into the world after all." Riley glanced at him sharply and saw the humor dancing in his eyes.

"You don't really kill..." Riley began.

Jerry interrupted her with a wave of his hand. "Now what is this fabulous device here?" He had grabbed at Riley's bow that rested against the back wall. It was a recurve bow – the arms curling in an intricate vine-like pattern. Crystalline red roses had been embedded at the base of the grip, throbbing softly as though they had a heartbeat.

"We managed to defeat a dungeon during our trip. I found it after we had slain a hydra," Riley explained, eyeing the bow cautiously. In Jerry's hands, the crystal had grown darker, turning almost black. She noted the change with curiosity. She still didn't understand what the bow was capable of since the special effect was locked.

"Remarkable workmanship," Jerry said, his fingers plucking delicately at the string and then tracing the roses. "I feel like it has a story to tell," he said wistfully.

Riley looked up at him in confusion as she gathered her equipment. "What do you mean?"

Jerry gazed at the bow. "Just look at the exquisite detail that

went into these roses. It's as though someone poured their soul into this weapon." He glanced up and grinned. "Or I might just be fond of roses. They are flower royalty after all!"

Riley hesitated, her brow furrowed as she considered whether to explain the quest prompt she had received after finding the bow. She felt like it was safe to be candid with the innkeeper. He was a member of the city's Shadow Council, and Jason certainly trusted him.

"There is actually a backstory to that bow. It was once owned by a woman named Lily, whose family was kidnapped and killed by the same cultists we encountered north of Peccavi."

She walked up to Jerry and took the bow from him. As her fingers wrapped around the grip, the crystal roses changed color again, turning a more vibrant red. She could have sworn she felt a faint tremor come from the weapon, but it might have been her imagination.

"She had vowed to seek revenge against those cultists but was killed before she could finish. When I first picked the weapon up, it gave me a quest to continue the woman's mission," Riley continued.

Jerry let out a small cough, his hand covering his mouth. "And what would that mission be exactly?" he asked, curiosity in his voice.

Riley glanced up at him, her eyes still pulsing with dark energy as she channeled her mana. "To end the lives of the men responsible for her family's death."

Jerry gave an exaggerated shiver. "A tale of intrigue and murder. I like it! Where do you plan to start?"

Riley shook her head. "I don't have time to deal with this right now. I expect Jason will be back online later today, and he'll almost certainly have some new plan for the city."

"The Twilight Throne will stand for a few days without you. Perhaps you need some time to yourself," Jerry suggested softly.

Looking up at him, Riley met the innkeeper's eyes. They were filled with the same compassion she had seen on Ms. Collins' face. It was eerie the way the game echoed her conversation with the school nurse. Was she really receiving advice from a character inside of a video game?

"Perhaps..." Riley replied, her eyes dropping to the floor. "I don't even know where to start." She glanced up, a small smile curling her lips. "You wouldn't happen to know where I can find a group of crazy cultists hell-bent on creating a homemade god would you?"

Jerry twirled his mustache, a thoughtful look on his face. "That doesn't exactly narrow it down. Are these your garden-variety cultists? All virgin sacrifices and chanting?"

Riley chuckled, looping the bow over her shoulder. "As far as I know, they are more into shapeshifting, and they have a weird

fixation on the elemental affinities,” she replied. “You know, fire, air, water, etc.”

“So, that’s a no on the virgins? How dull. Perhaps they still live in their mother’s secret dungeon, if you know what I mean,” Jerry said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Riley just stared at him for a moment with a deadpan expression. Jerry finally cracked a huge grin. “You have the same lousy sense of humor as our Dark Lord and Savior. Perhaps some time apart *would* do you good. Then maybe you would appreciate my comedic genius.”

Riley groaned and started heading for the staircase leading up to the inn. “Wait, wait. I tease, but I might be able to help you,” Jerry said, stepping in front of her in a flash of movement. “I’ve heard some rumors from the south that Vaerwald has been experiencing a few difficulties of late.”

“What kind of difficulties?” Riley asked impatiently, motioning for the undead thief to get on with it.

“The magical kind. It seems a plague of sorts has struck the city, yet it only affects residents with an affinity for the elemental magics. I only mention it because there might be some connection with your particular brand of cultist.” As soon as Jerry finished speaking, Riley received a quest notification:

### **Quest Update: Violent Vindication**

After discovering the mysterious crystalline bow *Vendetta* in the dungeon north of Peccavi, you were tasked with carrying out Lily’s original mission – to kill the cultists responsible for her family’s death. Jerry has provided a clue for where you could begin your search. He suggested you investigate Vaerwald to the south.

**Difficulty:** A

**Success:** Kill the cultists responsible for the death of Lily’s family.

**Failure:** Unknown

**Reward:** Unlock Vendetta’s special ability. Other rewards unknown.

Riley hesitated as she stared at the notification. Clearly, this was the game’s heavy-handed way of letting her know where to head next in her hunt. Yet, she still had obligations here in the city. “That does sound like it might be a lead,” Riley began noncommittally. “Where is Vaerwald exactly?”

“A few days south of the Twilight Throne. It has something of a reputation for being a breeding ground for *magas*,” Jerry replied, chewing on the word *magas* with mild disgust.

He began pacing in front of her. “I must warn you that they’re a pretentious lot. All stuck up with their books and their mutterings. And the locks! You wouldn’t believe the locks they put on everything. Magical locks, enchanted locks, locks that throw fireballs at you if you try to pick them!”

Jerry shuddered again and glanced at Riley with horror-filled eyes. “It’s no place for a respectable thief! How are we expected to make a living under such conditions?”

Riley smiled at the zombie innkeeper’s antics. “I suppose you could learn some magic, right? Then you could pick the *magical* locks.”

It was Jerry’s turn to look at her with a deadpan expression. “Surely you jest? Locks are meant to be mechanical and picked using the time-honored skillset of a noble thief,” he explained, putting a hand to his chest.

“Isn’t ‘noble thief’ an oxymoron?” Riley asked with a laugh.

Jerry grinned back at her and puffed up his chest. “Not when you are a purist for the craft, my lady.”

“Well, I’ll try to remember the issue with the locks then,” Riley replied. “Not that I expect I’ll be making the trip anytime soon. Anyway, I need to head to the market next and sell off some of the extra loot we found in the dungeon.” She looked at Jerry, and her expression turned serious. “Thanks for trying to cheer me up.”

Jerry bowed again. “It is an honor. As I told the Lord of Terror himself, I missed my true calling when I became a thief. Comedy has always been my muse.”

Riley laughed and started heading upstairs. As she left, Jerry’s white eyes followed her and the bow on her back. “Besides, sometimes a bit of humor makes the memories hurt less,” he whispered to himself.



## Chapter 3 - Recruited

As Riley stepped into the massive courtyard that housed the Twilight Throne's market, she tugged down on the edge of her hood, obscuring her blonde hair and face. She had been careful to drape her cloak over her bow. It was doubtful that anyone would recognize the weapon yet, but it was better to be safe than sorry. There was a real-world bounty on her head after all. It was quite a bit smaller than Jason's, but she didn't particularly want to be the first member of <Original Sin> to be killed off publicly.

She glanced cautiously around the market as she weaved in between the throng of people. Wooden stalls lined the large courtyard in ragged lines, traders shouting out advertisements for their wares to the other undead and players. Meanwhile, the dark keep loomed over the square, its spires reaching up into the boiling black clouds that perpetually hung over the city. The occasional flash of lightning briefly illuminated the stalls and milling shoppers, but Riley had no trouble navigating in the dark with her *Night Vision*.

Nearly any in-game item could be purchased directly from the merchants. Or, in her case, anything she found could be sold to the vendors. Jason had been running tight on gold when they had returned to the Twilight Throne, but they still had plenty of salvaged equipment that they had taken from enemy players that they could sell. Since Jason was no longer desperate to acquire real-world money using the game's auction house, he suggested that Riley sell some of the loot and upgrade her own equipment.

*I could definitely use it*, she thought as she picked at the edge of her leather armguard. Scorch marks still scarred the leather, a lingering present from the Elemental Hydra and the game master they had encountered. She knew that the rest of her armor was in even worse condition and one of her daggers was nearly broken.

Jason's only condition was that Riley needed to use the NPC vendors, not the in-game auction house, to purchase new gear. His goal was to improve his city's economy, and the player-run auction house only served to line the pockets of people in other cities.

"Ho there, girl," a zombie called to her as she passed. Riley glanced to the side, her hand automatically resting on one of the blades at her waist. The man sensed her alarm and put up his empty hands in a conciliatory fashion. "I just noticed that you look like you could use some new armor." The man motioned to the table in front of him and the racks that hung along the back of his stall, showcasing

various types of equipment.

Riley sighed. She was a bit on edge. First Jerry and now the shopkeeper. "I could indeed," she agreed and approached the merchant. His milky eyes watched her carefully, and she noted that he kept his hands visible.

*Maybe I'm more intimidating than I realized.*

"Are you looking for something in particular?" the man asked amiably.

She smiled slightly. "Practically everything. A new cuirass, a new cloak, a new set of bags. I could also probably use shoulder guards, new armguards, breeches, and a quiver." As she rattled off the items, the man's eyes continued to widen.

"Umm... what quality of merchandise will you require?" he asked.

Riley tapped her fingers to her lips as she considered his question. "C Quality or better would be ideal. I'm focused on equipment that boosts *Dexterity* primarily. Other than that, a mixture of *Strength* and *Vitality* would work perfectly."

"On which piece," the zombie asked, his brow furrowing as he looked back at his goods and pulled a piece of parchment from his bag and started to scribble small notes.

Riley looked at him in confusion for a moment. "On every piece."

The old zombie looked between his inventory and Riley several times before a large smile curled his bleached lips. "I think I can help you, but it's going to cost a bit of coin."

"Would you care to barter for other goods?" Riley asked.

"Well, it depends on the..." the storekeeper began.

Riley interrupted him by dumping the contents of one of her packs on the tables. Bladed weapons, jeweled amulets, and heavy mail tumbled onto the table. The passersby in the street didn't even give the scene a second glance since the magical properties of most packs was common knowledge in AO, and it was typical for players to sell their goods at a vendor. Most of the gear was unusable for Riley and her crew. She wouldn't be wearing heavy armor that increased her *Willpower* or jewelry that gave bonuses to *Intelligence*.

The storekeeper's former smile reappeared and grew quite a bit wider. "I think we can work something out," he said. "Why don't I show you what I have?"

A few minutes later, Riley was wearing a completely new set of armor. She opted for leather dyed a dark black and gray since stealth was a priority and her *Night Vision* made her most lethal at night. The new armor emphasized *Dexterity* primarily, but she had picked a few pieces with *Strength* and *Vitality* since she had found herself in melee

on a number of occasions. She then made her way to a jeweler and picked out a new amulet and set of rings, all of which added to her *Dexterity*.

Once finished, she found a quiet spot in an alley near the outskirts of the market. It sat near an open café away from the major roadways. Being cautious, she activated *Sneak* and then pulled up her Character Status.

Character Status			
<b>Name:</b>	Riley	<b>Gender:</b>	Female
<b>Level:</b>	116	<b>Class:</b>	Archer
<b>Race:</b>	Human	<b>Alignment:</b>	Lawful-Evil
<b>Fame:</b>	0	<b>Infamy:</b>	2900
<b>Health:</b>	2030	<b>H-Regen/Sec:</b>	7.05
<b>Mana:</b>	680	<b>M-Regen/Sec:</b>	1.00
<b>Stamina</b>	1580	<b>S-Regen/Sec:</b>	10.00
<b>Strength:</b>	110	<b>Dexterity:</b>	396
<b>Vitality:</b>	145	<b>Endurance:</b>	100
<b>Intelligence:</b>	10	<b>Willpower:</b>	10

Affinities			
<b>Dark:</b>	26%	<b>Light:</b>	3%
<b>Fire:</b>	9%	<b>Water:</b>	2%
<b>Air:</b>	6%	<b>Earth:</b>	3%

Riley assumed her stats were respectable. She had prioritized *Dexterity* when allocating her stat points since the attribute seemed to improve her accuracy, speed, and balance. It didn't exactly make her run faster, but she did notice a slight improvement in how quickly she could fire her bow, and it dramatically improved her reflexes and balance.

She wasn't ecstatic about her alignment but, it was to be

expected after following Jason around. She had come to realize that most of his actions were intended to protect the city and its residents which was admirable. However, it was how he went about it that had caused him to be reviled as the game's up-and-coming villain. He was certainly an "ends justify the means" sort of person.

A dingy sound distracted Riley from the review of her Character Status. She glanced at the user interface that lingered along the edges of her vision and noticed that she had just received a message. She tapped the mail icon and saw that it was from Jason:

Riley and Frank,

I'm not sure what happened the other day or why we got kicked from the game, but I won't be able to log back in for a few days. There's a real-life issue I need to deal with. No need to worry.

Jason

*Well, that's vague.*

Riley had puzzled over what had happened in the Dark Keep the day before. The entire team had been standing on one of the lower levels around a well of dark mana. The substance had knocked Jason unconscious, and, as soon as he came to, the game had immediately crashed. Riley had checked the server status after getting kicked but found no problems on the company's end. She figured it must have been some glitch associated with that area.

Getting kicked from the game hadn't worried her, but Jason's message gave her pause. The fact that he wouldn't be logging in meant something serious had happened. He practically lived inside the game now, and she couldn't remember the last time she hadn't seen him online. Not only that but asking her not to worry just made her more nervous.

She considered logging out and calling him. If he didn't answer, she could always just visit his aunt's house. Then she recalled that her leg was currently propped up on several pillows and thought better of it. A glance at her friends list showed that Frank had come online recently. Maybe he would know what was going on. After looking at her map, she could see that Frank was at the training grounds.

With a plan in place, Riley broke *Sneak* and tugged her hood back down over her face. As she stepped lightly down the alley, a black cat crossed the entrance ahead of her. Her brow furrowed for a moment, wondering if it was Jason's cat Onyx. Moving quickly, she

stepped out into the courtyard and glanced around. Yet the feline had disappeared.

*It could have just been another cat,* she thought. *I'm probably jumping to conclusions with Jason's recent message.*

Shaking her head, Riley moved passed the café adjacent to the alley. The restaurant had a small outdoor seating area filled with crude wooden tables and boisterous patrons. As she stepped near a table along the railing circling the café, she caught a snippet of conversation from a group of players.

"Can we get going already?" a brawny young man groaned. "It's a long trek back to Vaerwald in-game – a couple of days at least." Riley stopped short at the mention of the mage city. Not wanting to draw attention to herself, she stooped to inspect a menu posted on the board outside the restaurant as she watched the group out of the corner of her eye. The speaker was sitting at a table with a young woman and another thin young man with unruly brown hair.

"Patience, Ethan," the woman answered in an exasperated tone. "If we leave now or in ten minutes, it will still take days in-game to get there." Riley noted that she wore mage robes, the bright white cloth standing out in the gloom of the Twilight Throne.

*A light mage?* Riley thought to herself. *The burly one must be some sort of warrior.*

"No kidding," the other skinny teenager said, pushing a lock of hair out of his eyes. "Plus, we came here to see the city. We may as well savor the last few minutes. Not many people can say they had a beer in the Twilight Throne." He also wore robes, but his were a plain brown. His staff was propped up against the table, and Riley observed the marred crystal that was embedded in the wood. It wasn't clear what school of magic he was affiliated with based on his attire, but his gear was poor quality.

"What is there to savor?" Ethan grumbled irritably. He dug at the wooden table with his dagger, a bored expression on his face. "You can't see anything in this gloom, and the creepy green street lamps don't exactly help. Not to mention, the woods around the city are filled with feral zombies and skeletons." He paused and looked at the other two in turn. "This is officially the worst vacationing spot ever."

"And we'll be leaving soon," the woman replied evenly. "We need to return to the city anyway so that Lucas and I can train." She rested her hand on the skinny man's arm as she said this and he patted her hand in return. "It's not like there are any mage trainers here – unless, of course, you're a dark mage."

*Are they a couple?* Riley wondered as she watched them.

She didn't wonder for long; there was a more pressing question

she needed to consider. Why was she still standing there? Didn't she have more important things to do? Yet, she couldn't stop thinking about the mage city or the quest prompt she had received after talking to Jerry. If Jason wasn't logging back in for a few days and all he could give her was some cryptic explanation, then maybe she ought to follow this quest line. That might be a better use of her time than sitting around the Twilight Throne twiddling her thumbs.

Making up her mind, Riley quickly tapped at her interface to bring up the system menu and disabled the tag for her guild name. Then she stepped around the wooden post in front of her and into the restaurant. She approached the group cautiously, keeping her hood drawn. As she neared the players, Ethan looked up at her – his hand resting on the massive great sword strapped to his back.

"Can we help you?" he asked gruffly.

"Perhaps you can," Riley replied. "I was walking past and overheard you mention that you were traveling to Vaerwald. That's where I'm headed next. I was wondering if I could accompany you. It might be a bit safer to travel with a group than on my own."

*I also doubt that anyone would expect me to group with a bunch of strangers,* she thought as she considered the bounty on her head.

The woman observed Riley's gear and gave an unimpressed snort. Riley still wore a worn-looking cloak that obscured her weapons and equipment. She had intended to give the appearance that she was a beginning player. Her observation was that players with a low *Perception* skill couldn't easily pick out her level.

"The area between here and the city is riddled with high-level monsters," the woman explained. "We can't afford to carry a low-level player."

Riley took the opportunity to inspect the group. They were each in the mid-50s. "I think I can handle myself," Riley replied. "Besides, you guys have a tank, a healer, and a caster, right? I'm an archer, so I doubt I'll be in the way; I might even be able to help."

Lucas gave the woman beside him a questioning look. "That kind of makes sense. I don't see why we can't help her out. We're headed in the same direction after all."

The woman frowned and looked to the warrior for support. "Don't look at me, I don't care," Ethan said distractedly. "I'm fine with anything as long as we get moving soon."

"I can leave immediately," Riley said, deciding to change her plans. She could always message Frank while she was on the road.

"Well, then that sounds like a plan," Lucas said. "What's your name?" Riley hesitated, unsure how to respond. The man must have interpreted that as confusion. "So I can invite you to the group," he added, motioning to a system window in front of him that she couldn't

see.

*I can't lie if they invite me since my player name will show up in the group menu. I'm just going to have to hope they don't recognize who I am.* At least she wasn't as well-known as Jason.

"It's Riley," she said cautiously. She breathed a mental sigh of relief when the players didn't react. "Just let me drop my current group." She made a few gestures in the air in front of her. "There. Go ahead."

After accepting the group invitation, Riley could see the players' names and status information in the corner of her vision. The large man was indeed named Ethan, and the woman's name was Emma. However, the young man's name wasn't Lucas – it listed him as "Cowabungus."

"Uh..." Riley began.

Lucas looked embarrassed. "Yeah, I know. I was stupid and picked a tag I used in other games. I didn't realize how realistic AO would be. You can just call me Lucas," he said with a grin.

"Okay," Riley replied with a chuckle, not missing the dark look she received from Emma. "Thanks for the invite. Do you want to head over to the south gate now?"

"Sounds good to me!" Ethan said, mustering the first signs of excitement she had seen from him. He rose from the table, hoisting a heavy pack and throwing it over his shoulder. "Come on guys, let's move it!"

Lucas and Emma groaned and readied their equipment. As they started walking toward the south gate, Riley felt a bit nervous. This would be the first time that she had played AO on her own. Technically, she was with a group, but she was still unaccustomed to making her own decisions. However, her curiosity regarding the quest was still greater than her sense of trepidation.

As she walked at the rear of the group, her eyes rested on the backs of the other players as they bickered playfully. An amused expression slid across Riley's face – at least this would be an interesting change of pace.

## Chapter 4 - Adventurous

The group's journey through the dark woods surrounding the Twilight Throne had been uneventful so far. The dead, gnarled limbs of the trees overhung the road like grim claws, and Riley could see intermittent flashes of lightning in the boiling, black sky. As they progressed through the forest, Riley noticed that the thick cloud cover had begun to slowly thin. The ever-present darkness lifted gradually as they traveled.

The gloom that still hovered over the road was currently being pushed back by a crystalline white light that shined from the crystal embedded in the top of Emma's staff. She maintained the illumination spell constantly since everyone but Riley lacked the *Night Vision* skill.

Riley idly considered that this was a strange change of pace from Jason's method of travel, which emphasized caution and darkness. The group spoke loudly with each other and walked at a casual pace down the winding road. This seemed like a waste of time to Riley, but she supposed with the game's heightened realism, most players wouldn't choose to travel at a brisk jog.

As they trekked through the forest, Riley received a chat invitation from Frank. She pulled up her chat window as she kept pace with the other players. Her hands drifted across the luminescent blue keyboard hovering in the air before her.

**Frank:** Hey, Riley. Why did you drop the group?

**Riley:** I received a lead on the quest for my bow, and I'm traveling with a group of players to a city south of the Twilight Throne. I figured I might as well do something constructive while Jason is busy.

**Frank:** And you didn't invite me!? I'm joking. I'm dealing with some in-game stuff of my own. By the way, what did you make of Jason's message? Did he give you any more info?

**Riley:** I was actually going to ask you the same question. Do



you think he's okay?

**Frank:** I'm sure he's alright. I can't imagine what would keep him out of the game, but it must be important. Maybe I'll drop by his house in the next couple days and find out what's going on.

**Riley:** That sounds like a good idea. Just keep me in the loop, okay?

**Frank:** Will do! Good luck on your quest!

**Riley:** Thanks.

Riley terminated the chat log. She bit her lip as she considered what Frank had told her. Jason was often rather uncommunicative, but it was odd that he hadn't told Frank or Riley anything about what was going on. She could feel a familiar worry bloom in her chest – not that she could really do anything about it at the moment.

“Something the matter?” Lucas asked, coming up beside her. He used his crude staff as a walking stick and kept well within the circle of light cast by Emma's spell.

“Why are you asking?” Riley replied.

“It's just that you look a bit anxious,” he said, watching her. “Not that I can see much of your face with your hood,” he added with a chuckle.

“I'm just worried about a friend. It's not a big deal,” Riley said, swiping away the windows in front of her with a wave of her hand.

“Oh, a *boyfriend*?” Ethan asked with a bark of laughter and a glance over his shoulder. His mood seemed to have improved now that they were making some headway toward their destination. Ethan's comment earned Riley a curious glance from Emma.

Riley's face flushed slightly in embarrassment, her reaction hidden by her cowed hood. “Not exactly,” she said. “He's just a friend.”

“Single *and* mysterious, huh?” Lucas asked with a grin.

Riley smiled at him in return, causing Emma's eyes to darken as she watched the pair. She decided to change the subject. “So where

are you guys from? It's the middle of the day for me. Are you all skipping class or something?"

"We all live in the United Kingdom," Emma said, straightening her back slightly. "We attend a university together outside of London."

"I guess that would explain how you guys can be online at this time of day. It must be evening for you," Riley replied. She wouldn't have guessed that the three were in college based on their appearance, but she supposed that college freshman and sophomores likely wouldn't look much older than herself. She also didn't detect much of an accent when they spoke. "That'll be convenient as we travel. I'm in the U.S., and I'm usually done with class by early afternoon," Riley added.

"Great," Ethan spoke up. "We should be able to make good time without having to wait on each other. They really need to add some kind of auto-pilot or quick travel system to this game."

"I second that!" Lucas said. "I'm getting tired of walking everywhere."

Riley kept quiet. She didn't mind the travel times. She had come to realize that the lengthy distances between cities were part of what protected the Twilight Throne. If a huge group of players could suddenly materialize out of thin air outside the walls, they would constantly be under siege.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard a faint rustle from the tree line. Her enhanced vision and her *Perception* skill picked out the faint blue outline of footprints in the gray dirt.

"I think we should..." Riley began but broke off quickly as dark missiles suddenly erupted from the trees. Acting on instinct, Riley dropped to her stomach, pulling Lucas down with her. She could hear whistles as the arrows raced above them and the thud of the missiles striking the dirt some distance away. After the first attack, the woods went silent again.

"Damn it," Ethan muttered. Riley glanced up and saw that the burly warrior lay on the ground, clutching at his leg. The shaft of an arrow was buried in his thigh, and blood welled around the wound. Emma was also on the ground, an arrow jutting from her abdomen. She stared at the wooden shaft in horror, her hands hovering above the arrow.

Riley shook herself out of her stupor, automatically summoning her dark mana. She could feel the icy chill pulse through her veins. "Emma," she hissed, the woman looking at her with panicked eyes. "Yank it out and heal yourself. Then get Ethan up but stay low to the ground."

Riley turned her gaze to Lucas beside her. He had managed to escape the first barrage unscathed due to her quick reflexes. "You and

I need to make it to the tree line and attack them in the woods. Got it?"

Lucas nodded at her numbly, clutching at his staff as his eyes darted to their injured teammates. Riley didn't wait to see if he followed her orders. She jumped to her feet and sprinted to the edge of the road. She could hear arrows race through the air around her. Time seemed to slow as her *Dodge* skill activated. The missiles decelerated slightly, allowing her to nimbly duck and weave to avoid the bolts. Even with her heightened reflexes, one grazed her face, leaving a thin line of blood in its wake and slicing through the fabric of her hood.

Ignoring her stinging cheek and not bothering to check to see whether Lucas was following, Riley entered the forest. She swiftly put her back to a tree, hearing dull thumps as more arrows were embedded in the wood on the other side. A few seconds later, Lucas slammed less gracefully into a nearby tree, having used Riley as a decoy to make it to the tree line.

"Give it up," a voice barked from deeper in the woods. "We've got your group surrounded. We just want your equipment. Drop everything you're carrying, move back to the road with your hands up, and we'll spare your lives."

Riley didn't bother to respond. Between her *Night Vision* and the sound of the man's voice, she could roughly place his position. She saw his body edging out from behind a tree, his pale skin practically glowing in her enhanced sight.

*Are they undead?* Riley wondered in shock.

She didn't have time to reflect on this question. She pulled her bow from her shoulder and knocked an arrow. Lucas looked at her in surprise. "What are you doing?" he whispered. "You can't hit anything in this darkness."

She raised an eyebrow, then pulled back on the string and darted from behind cover. As she raced for another tree, Riley fired several arrows in quick succession. She heard a muffled groan, and her combat log showed that she had made her first kill.

"Rupert?" a voice called out. "What just happened?" Riley shifted her head again. There must be more undead in the trees. She could see a man cowering a few dozen feet away, but she couldn't be certain where the others were located. She took a deep breath.

*What would Jason do?* She asked herself.

Her eyes darted back to the tree where Lucas was hiding. He was practically useless in the darkness of the woods, and he was severely under-gearred. She could make out faint flashes of light from the roadway signaling that Emma was trying to heal herself and Ethan. Riley was the only one in the group capable of taking out their

ambushers.

*I need a distraction*, she thought as she returned her gaze to Lucas. With her position now unknown to the enemy, she activated *Sneak*. Then she pulled up her chat menu and typed a quick group message to Lucas, ordering him to wait thirty seconds and then start launching spells from his location. He didn't need to target anything in particular – just draw their attention.

Without waiting for his reply, Riley swiped the chat log away and crept farther into the woods, flanking the undead archers. As she moved forward, she counted the seconds in her head: *twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine*. At thirty seconds, Riley stood and faced the road, drawing the string of her bow back to her ear. A bolt of lightning flashed through the trees and struck a trunk with a crash and a blinding explosion of light. At the same time, the undead hidden in the forest moved from behind cover, pelting the tree that Lucas hid behind.

Riley didn't hesitate. Her bow repeatedly hummed as arrow after arrow raced forward. Under the effects of *Steady Aim*, time slowed, and her vision increased, allowing her to pick off the undead archers. Four men soon dropped to the ground. Then she reactivated *Sneak* and hurried back to Lucas' location.

As she neared his tree, Riley whispered, "All of the archers on this side of the road are dead, but there are still more on the other side." She could hear the thumps of arrows striking the roadway behind them and the shouts of Emma and Ethan. A glance at her party menu also showed that the pair were taking damage and their health was plummeting.

"What are you talking about?" Lucas asked in a confused voice, his eyes wide.

Riley sighed. She was too used to the calculating dispassion of Frank and Jason. It was strange to be dealing with someone unaccustomed to battle. "Just turn around and move back towards the road. We need to hurry, or your friends will die." Lucas nodded, and they crept closer to the road, taking cover behind two trees.

Riley could see Emma and Ethan standing in the road. The warrior shielded the mage with his bulk, having pulled a shield and longsword from his pack. Arrows pinged off the metal and flashes of light illuminated the pair as Emma healed their wounds. However, they were pinned down by the undead archers and were unable to make it to the tree line.

Thinking quickly, Riley turned to Lucas. "Emma's a light mage, right?" He nodded numbly. "Does she have a spell that creates an explosion of light?"

"Uh, yeah. She picked it up just before we left Vaerwald," he

whispered.

“Good,” Riley replied. “Message Emma and Ethan in group chat and tell them to cast the spell in sixty seconds. Also, remind them to keep their eyes closed. When the spell goes off, they need to start attacking the undead on the other side of the road. Got it?”

Lucas nodded, and his hands began waving in the air, presumably pulling up his chat window. Riley didn’t wait for him to finish. She reactivated *Sneak* and started moving quickly north along the tree line. After crossing the road, she entered the forest on the other side. She needed to flank the group of archers.

Riley saw a warning in her chat log and squeezed her eyes shut at the last second. A blinding explosion of light pierced the gloom; the glare was visible through her eyelids. She waited a full second and then opened her eyes. She could see that the forest was now engulfed in light, a glowing ball hovering over the roadway. Riley didn’t bother to question what spell Emma had used. Instead, she began sniping the undead in the forest, who were staggered and blinded by the unexpected explosion.

Riley heard a roar and Ethan soon entered the fray. Now that he could see his opponents, he rushed forward. Swinging his longsword wildly and with poor form, he held his shield in front of him. His inexperience made little difference since the undead weren’t in a condition to put up much resistance. Meanwhile, Lucas also joined the battle, hurling another bolt of lightning that slammed into an undead archer, electrifying the man. His twitching form hit the ground, and Ethan quickly finished him off.

Soon only one undead remained. Riley could see that the man was trying to flee farther into the forest, likely hoping to hide in the darkness. She sighted along her arrow carefully, tracking his movement through the trees. She activated *Aimed Shot* and then fired. Her missile darted between the dead trunks and pierced the man’s thigh. He stumbled and then fell forward, landing with a thump. Riley ran after him.

As she neared the undead, she saw that Ethan had beat her to the zombie. His sword was raised, and he was about to end the man’s life. Without thinking, Riley drew an arrow and released in a flash of movement. The arrow struck Ethan’s sword and knocked it off course. The blade slammed into the gray dirt, throwing up a shower of dust.

“What the hell?” Ethan asked angrily as Riley approached at a jog.

“I want him alive,” Riley responded shortly. Lucas and Emma approached cautiously from the roadway. As the pair in front of them argued, they decided to stay quiet.

“What for? These guys tried to kill us.” Ethan retorted.

“Aren’t you curious why?” Riley asked. “Besides, he poses no threat.” She motioned to the prone undead, who held his empty hands up defensively as he watched them bicker. His milky white eyes were wide with fear.

Riley turned to the man, her eyes pulsing with dark energy as she channeled her mana. She reveled in the sensation as it drove away her doubt and hesitation. “Who are you, and why did you attack us?”

“I-I’m nobody,” he answered with a stammer.

“Well, Mr. Nobody, you tried to kill our group and steal our equipment. My friend here wants to end your miserable life. You better start talking fast, or I just might let him.”

The zombie’s eyes darted between Ethan’s scowling face and Riley’s hard gaze. Then a look of resignation swept over his face. “We were raised by Jason after the battle between Grey Keep and the Twilight Throne. A few of us abandoned the city.” At a threatening gesture from Riley, he raised his hands again and added, “Jason himself offered to let us leave!”

“Did he also give you permission to waylay travelers along the road?” Riley asked menacingly. She inspected the man and saw that he was nearly level 80. His armor was also in good repair, and his weapons were high quality. He and his buddies must have ambushed quite a few players to be doing so well.

“What else were we to do?” the zombie spat. “Either we live under the thumb of a tyrant or live penniless and hated in the gutter. No city will take us in!”

Riley watched the man, shocked by his response. She hadn’t considered what kind of life the deserters would lead outside the city. This was a potential problem and needed to be reported to Jason. An idle thought crossed her mind. “Are there more of you?” she asked the zombie.

Emma glanced at her in surprise. “Why do we care? This isn’t a quest.”

Riley tried to think of a reasonable answer that didn’t reveal her position within the Twilight Throne’s hierarchy. “I’m bound to the undead city. I’d like to know if I’m going to be ambushed every time I travel outside of town,” Riley finally retorted. Emma seemed to accept this response.

“Answer my question,” Riley demanded, turning back to the zombie and prodding his injured leg with her bow.

The man glared at her before responding. “Yes, there are more of us. We grow every day. There are many who don’t wish to live under Jason’s banner.”

*Now that’s much more problematic,* Riley thought.

She made a mental note to discuss this with Jason the next time

she saw him. They might need to rid the forest of these rebels quietly to avoid creating morale problems within the city. It was one thing to let the new undead leave, it was another to permit them to ambush players and NPCs. Their control of the city and this area was already tenuous.

“Thank you for your help,” Riley replied. Then she raised her bow and nocked an arrow.

“Wait! I answered your questions!” the man pleaded.

“I appreciate that, but I never promised that I wouldn’t kill you myself,” Riley said coldly. Her bow hummed and an arrow promptly embedded itself in the man’s eye. He slumped to the ground, his body unmoving.

Her teammates eyed Riley in shock. Then Ethan barked a short laugh. “Damn, girl. Remind me not to get on your bad side.” He smacked her on the back and started back through the forest to inspect the bodies for loot. Emma and Lucas simply shook their heads, their eyes full of conflicting emotions. Turning, they followed after Ethan.

She watched the group as they walked away, her obsidian eyes covered by the cowl of her hood and her mana still pulsing through her veins. She used to be like them – naïve and unaccustomed to the brutal existence of this world. Her time with Jason had shown her the error of her ways. To survive here, you needed to act without hesitation. She suspected they would learn that eventually.

## Chapter 5 - Rural

The group walked in silence after the ambush. Riley had let the other players loot the corpses and keep the meager gear and coin. She certainly had no use for them, and she was still flush with cash after trading her extra loot back in the Twilight Throne. Riley had taken point after the attack, keeping a watchful eye on the forest around them. She wasn't anxious to repeat the experience.

Emma finally broke the silence. "You clearly aren't a low-level player," she said in an accusing voice.

"I'm not," Riley replied shortly. She glanced over her shoulder, meeting Emma's gaze evenly. "I never said I was. You made that assumption when we first met."

Ethan snorted. "I'm not certain I care. What you did back there was awesome. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

Riley's thoughts drifted back to the battles she had fought with Jason and Frank. Those fights were usually heavily stacked against them. They required careful planning and lightning-fast reflexes. In contrast, fighting a few low-level deserters wasn't much of a challenge. She hadn't even leveled from the encounter.

"You'd be surprised what you can learn if you speak to the weapon masters in the major cities," Riley dissembled. "The game puts a cap on how high you can raise your skills and stats through training, but it still provides a considerable bonus."

"See," Lucas exclaimed, gesturing at Riley. "I told you we needed to train more before we left the city, Ethan." This earned him an eye roll from the burly warrior.

Lucas turned to Riley. "Well, we appreciate the help. We were bound to the Twilight Throne since we tried to do some leveling in this area. If those guys had killed us, we would have lost a ton of time walking back."

Emma sniffed. "She just got the jump on a bunch of deserters. It wasn't like she killed them all single-handedly."

Riley wasn't sure what Emma's problem was, but she decided not to rock the boat. The other players were still useful to her, and a bit of diplomacy might shut Emma up. "You're right, I only helped. I doubt I could have taken them out without the three of you."

"Hey, look up ahead," Ethan said, interrupting their conversation and pointing farther down the road. The sky had lightened considerably as they had continued onward and now streamers of smoke were visible through the thinning woods –



evidence of a town ahead.

“That must be Sibald,” Ethan added, his hands dancing in the air in front of him as he checked his in-game map. “We passed through the town on the way here.”

Riley frowned. This was another one of the villages Jason was pledged to conquer on behalf of the Twilight Throne. As she remembered the poverty stricken and sickly residents of Peccavi, she wondered how Sibald had fared after the transformation of the surrounding forest.

Her question was soon answered as the village came into sight. The trees had been cleared closer to the town, creating an artificial meadow in the forest. Riley didn’t see any walls or obvious defenses, yet the buildings were made of much finer materials than in Peccavi. They were constructed of rough-hewn trunks and resembled log cabins. Wisps of smoke streamed from mortared chimneys attached to each structure. The roads were also in better repair, and the town sported cobblestones along its streets instead of merely dusty gray dirt.

Lanterns hung from posts lining the street, illuminating a bustling village. As they walked through the town, Riley noticed that the residents moved with energetic efficiency and their clothing was in decent repair. The human villagers also appeared to be well-fed and healthy. They waved amiably at the group as they walked past. This was quite a strange turn of events compared to Peccavi.

*Wouldn’t they be affected by the same food supply problems as the other villages?* Riley wondered. *Or maybe it’s because they aren’t being attacked by were-beasts.*

As they passed between the buildings, the group soon entered a large square. Riley spotted a crowd that was gathered around a makeshift stage along one side of the open area. “What’s that?” she asked, motioning to the gathered NPCs.

“I have no idea,” Lucas answered. “I don’t remember seeing this when we passed through a few days ago. I just remember this being a rather dumpy place.”

“The word you’re looking for is boring,” Ethan muttered. “There wasn’t a quest in sight the last time we were here.”

Riley’s frown deepened, and she approached the crowd, weaving her way between the townsfolk. Strangely, she noticed that many were well-dressed – sporting tunics made of velvet and silk. The guard presence was also substantial. Her *Perception* skill picked out several men that wore concealed weapons and mail beneath their tunics.

*What’s going on here?*

As she neared the front of the group, Riley could see that an

overweight man stood on stage addressing the crowd. “Good afternoon! We have a fresh catch for you fine folks! These are the best creatures we’ve found in nearly a fortnight,” the man announced loudly. “Just look at their limbs. They’re all intact and in good condition. This lot is well-suited for menial labor or even much more challenging tasks.”

The man prodded at the limbs of the skeletons and zombies that had been lined up on stage like undead cattle. Their heads were bowed, and they didn’t make eye contact with the portly merchant or the townsfolk.

“As with all our merchandise, they have been outfitted with explosive collars to ensure obedience and reliability.” The man kicked one of the undead women in the back of her knee, causing her to crumple forward. She meekly rose to a kneeling position. “See! They’re as docile as they come.”

The man gestured broadly, pulling the fabric of his velvet tunic tight across his chest. “Of course, this merchandise comes with all of the same benefits as our other splendid offerings. They don’t eat or sleep, and their endurance is nigh inexhaustible. These will make fitting additions for any mine or lumber camp.”

Riley’s eyes widened as she watched the scene playing out in front of her – anger curling and coiling in her stomach. She inadvertently summoned her mana, the icy energy clawing its way up behind her eyes. This must be what the deserter in the woods was alluding to when he said they couldn’t join the nearby villages.

“We’ll start the bidding at one gold piece per head,” the man continued, oblivious to Riley’s growing anger. “Do I hear one gold piece?”

*A gold apiece!* Her eyes scanned the town around her from a different perspective. No wonder the people here were thriving. They were capturing and selling the undead that abandoned the Twilight Throne at a healthy profit. They could likely use the funds to buy food from neighboring cities.

A nobleman beside Riley raised his hand. “I have one gold piece to the gentlemen there,” the merchant rattled on, “and I have two gold pieces to the lady in the lovely green hat.”

Riley could feel her temper rising. As she watched the cowed slaves and the man on stage, all she wanted to do was pull her bow free and plug the fat merchant full of arrows. A hand rested on her arm, and Riley whirled. A dagger appeared in her hand and pressed against the offending person’s stomach.

“Whoa there, Riley,” Ethan said, his eyes wide in surprise. “I’m on your side, remember?” Riley’s cowl pushed back slightly, and Ethan could see her obsidian eyes. The burly warrior backed away

slowly.

“I-I’m sorry,” Riley said, trying to get ahold of herself. She couldn’t create a scene here. This wasn’t the time or the place. She walked out of the crowd, trying to put some distance between herself and the gruesome spectacle on the stage. As they made their way out of the sea of townsfolk, she turned back to Ethan.

“How could they do that?” Riley hissed, motioning behind her.

Ethan shrugged. “It’s just a game. I’ve seen worse in the other stuff I’ve played.”

Sometimes, Riley wasn’t so certain that it *was* just a game. The longer she played, the harder it became to tell herself that this wasn’t real – that the lives of those men and women on the stage didn’t matter. The defeated look in their eyes was burned into her mind, and she just couldn’t shake the image.

“We have a winner,” the portly man shouted behind her. She turned and found him waving ecstatically at a robed figure near the stage. “This gentleman just purchased our whole inventory for fifty gold.”

Riley couldn’t see the man’s face, but his robes were a crimson red, and an orange flame was embroidered on his back. In his hand, the man carried an ornate wooden staff. Flames seemed to twist and turn inside the crystal embedded on the top.

“A fire guild Prefect,” Ethan muttered.

Lucas and Emma approached behind them, catching sight of the red-robed target of their attention. “A bunch of assholes is what they are,” he added.

“The fire guild?” Riley asked, confused.

“Have you never been to Vaerwald?” Emma asked, a hint of condescension in her voice. She leaped on the opportunity to flaunt her superior knowledge and began to explain. “The city is ruled by five mage guilds, each representing an elemental affinity and light magic. The guilds each elect a representative to the city’s council.”

“The fire guild members are the worst of the bunch,” Lucas added with a frown. “Most have short tempers, and their status in their guild is obtained by winning duels. They don’t respect anything but raw strength.”

Riley’s dark mana coursed through her veins like an icy river as she watched the fire mage lead the undead off the stage. “What do these duels entail?” she asked with more calmness than she felt.

“It’s a regular in-game duel,” Ethan spoke up. “You know, a pair fights until someone hits about 5% health. You can’t technically kill the other person while the duel is in effect. I was skeptical it worked between the game’s NPCs until I saw one myself.”

Lucas looked at Riley nervously, her eyes were still riveted on

the mage, and her mouth was pressed into a thin line. "You can't confront them, Riley," Lucas whispered, putting a hand on her arm.

Emma glared at him. "Let her embarrass herself if she wants to. This is none of our business. Why should we care about a bunch of walking corpses?"

Riley turned and eyed Emma coldly. "They are people, being enslaved and sold to the highest bidder. Does that *really* sit right with you?"

Emma flinched away slightly under her gaze. "I guess it's not great, but what are we going to do? We're in the middle of town, and there are guards everywhere. The fire guild isn't renowned for their weakness in battle," she added defensively.

Riley had to admit that Emma had a point. She was angry and not thinking clearly. Even Jason wouldn't try to challenge or attack the mages in this situation. She shook her head and forced herself to release her dark mana. She needed to calm down.

"You're right," Riley finally said. She glanced at her in-game clock and saw that it was getting late. They had been traveling for quite a while. "Maybe it's time for me to log off and get some stuff done in the real world. I bet it's really late for you all."

Ethan sighed, stretching his arms. "I do have to get up tomorrow and take an exam. We should probably call it a night. This is a good stopping point anyway since this is the last town before Vaerwald." Emma and Lucas nodded in agreement.

With that, each of Riley's teammates disappeared with a popping sound and a flash of multicolored light. As they logged off, her eyes turned back to the fire mage Prefect. He was gathering with a group of similarly attired mages, the undead lumbering sullenly behind him in a long line. There was nothing she could do to help them right now.

# Chapter 6 - Depressed

The next day, Riley returned from school with heavy thoughts weighing on her mind. A driverless car stopped in her front drive, and she stepped out, grabbing her bag from the backseat. As the car drove away, she heard the crunch of the tires on the pavement, and her eyes took in her home.

It was lovely – a testament to her father’s success. It was the type of picturesque Victorian home you would expect to see on the cover of a magazine. She half expected to see a ruddy-cheeked child streak across the lawn playing with a golden retriever to the smiling applause of his parents sitting on the porch swing.

She stood on the front lawn for a long moment, prolonging the inevitable conversation with her parents as she tugged at the sleeve of her sweater. Her thoughts spun in circles as she recalled her day at school. The girls had all snickered at her limp and her sullen demeanor. It was the same daily grind filled with whispered names and secret giggles. She could take it for a while, but there seemed to be no end to their spite or amusement at her suffering.

To make matters worse, it felt like her impotence in real life was being mirrored inside the game. She knew Jason would have come up with some clever scheme to free the undead slaves. He probably would have ended up sacking the whole town. She had tried all day to think of a way she could help those men and woman, but nothing came to her.

Riley shook herself and forced her feet to move. There was no point in standing in her front yard feeling sorry for herself. She limped up to the front door and waved her Core in front of the nearby panel. With an almost inaudible click, the door swung inward, and she stepped through. A soft chime could be heard as the house recognized the Core on her wrist and the hallway lit up automatically.

Riley made her way to the kitchen. Maybe she could ward off her dark thoughts with a cup of tea before she re-entered the game. As she walked toward the kitchen, she heard her parents’ voices drift down the hallway. She grimaced but forced herself to keep moving.

“Hey there, Riley,” her dad greeted as she entered the palatial kitchen. Her parents were seated at an island, coffee mugs resting on the marble countertop.

“Hi, Dad. Hi, Mom,” Riley replied, trying to muster some enthusiasm.

“We were just talking about my latest book,” her dad said. “It’s

doing well. Hopefully, another bestseller,” he added with a grin.

Her mother chuckled. “Assuming he can get the *New York Times* to pick it up. It might take a few phone calls to make that happen, though. I wish they would start selecting books based solely on sales, but I guess there’s no way to avoid politics in any industry.”

Riley suppressed a sigh as she made herself some tea. She had heard this debate before. It was nothing new in their household. Her father wrote self-help books. The book sales were nothing to sneer at, but it was the television appearances and presentations where he made his real money. His was a rags-to-riches story that happened to sell quite well.

“I’m sure the book will do great, dad,” Riley finally responded. “It’s not like you had any trouble with the last few.”

“You never know, the next one could be a flop,” he replied with a worried look.

As her father continued rambling on about his book, her mother’s eyes followed Riley as she walked around the kitchen. Her mother was a retired psychiatrist, although she still occasionally saw patients. Her brown hair was starting to gray, and wrinkles tugged at the corners of her eyes, yet she was still beautiful. She embraced her age with a poise Riley hoped she could muster one day.

Her mother rested a hand on her father’s thigh, quieting his rant. “Is there something wrong, dear?” she asked, directing her question at Riley.

Riley gritted her teeth at her mother’s perceptiveness. She didn’t know how to answer and complaining just felt petty and stupid. Shouldn’t she be able to put up with some teasing?

She set her mug on the counter and stared at the bag that bobbed in the steaming water. She wanted to tell them that she was fine – that she was just feeling down. Yet wasn’t that what had gotten her into this predicament in the first place? She had hyped up Alex’s threat in her own mind and never stopped to think about how her parents could help.

*Just do it,* she urged herself.

“Yeah,” Riley finally said. Her eyes rose to meet her parents. “Something is wrong. I hate my school.”

Her father’s eyes widened. “Richmond? What’s wrong with school? I thought you were getting along fine there. Is it that boy again?” His expression darkened with anger as he referred to Alex. He still couldn’t quite make himself say his name.

“In a way, yes.” She held up her hands to ward off their follow-up questions. “He hasn’t posted the video or anything, but he doesn’t have to. Rumors still work just as well. The things the other girls say...”

Riley's hands clenched around her mug. The heat burned the palms of her hands, grounding her. It wasn't the same as her dark mana, but it helped. "I just can't take it anymore. It's never ending. The names and the hateful things they say to me; that they do to me. How do you think this really happened to my shin?" she asked, lifting her leg.

Her parents were silent for a long moment, as though mulling over how to respond. Then her mother spoke up, "Why didn't you tell us sooner, Riley? We didn't realize the kids were bullying you like this."

"It just sounds so stupid when I say it out loud," she muttered. "It feels like all I do is cause problems. First with Alex and now this."

Her mother rose, circling the island and wrapping her arms around Riley. "Never feel afraid to come to us. We're always here for you. Besides, you didn't cause either situation. There are just terrible people in the world."

Her father cleared his throat. "I agree with your mother. We're definitely on Team Riley, but what's the solution here? You need to finish out the year. You only have eight months left, and graduating from Richmond carries a lot of weight with your college applications."

"I know," Riley murmured into her mom's sweater. She pulled back and shook her head, wiping at the tears budding at the corners of her eyes. "That's the worst part. I don't have a solution. Just endure it I guess..."

Her mother glanced at her father, anger flashing in her eyes. "I wouldn't normally suggest this, especially not with a patient." Her mother lifted Riley's chin with one hand until she met her gaze. "I could tell you that you 'need to stand up for yourself,' but that's not enough. Honestly, as your parent, you need to get *even*."

Riley looked at her mother in shock, not certain how to respond. Her mother kept going, "These girls are bullies. So was that disgusting boy Alex. At the end of the day, they'll only respond to one thing. Strength. You need to show them that you aren't afraid of them. If it were only one girl, that would be one thing. But you need to find a way to send a clear message to the rest of these kids."

Her father nodded and let out a deep chuckle. "Hell, retaliate physically if you have to. Show them you won't take their crap, and you aren't afraid to defend yourself. The school certainly won't expel you with the fees we pay. I will make certain of that. Plus, George Lane owes me a favor at this point."

They both looked at her evenly. "The bottom line is that you have our support Riley," her father continued. "Sometimes, when your back is to the wall, there's nothing you can do but fight. This sounds like one of those times."

Riley just stared at her parents. She hadn't expected this reaction from them. Her dad was the sort of guy that got up in front of thousands of people and advocated family values – not knocking out your school bully. She had heard him talk about “seizing the moment,” but she was certain this wasn't what he had meant.

“Don't look so surprised,” her dad laughed. “We haven't always been stuffy adults living in a nice house.” He gestured around the kitchen. “We had to fight for what we have. What people don't like to hear at those presentations I give is that you have to be willing to get dirty if you want to win in this world. There will always be people that try to knock you down, but sometimes you need to be willing to go to the mat.”

Her mother nodded in agreement, her eyes still fuming as she looked at Riley's bruised leg. “Also, if you get the chance to knock out the girl that did this to you, make sure she doesn't get back up.”

“I-I will,” Riley said, a small smile creasing her lips. She had completely misread her parents. “Maybe the two of you are right.”

“Hey, we're the all-knowing parents,” her dad joked. “Of course we're right.” Riley didn't bother to respond to that. She rose, hugged them both, and then excused herself – limping up to her room.

That conversation hadn't gone at all the way she'd expected. It was just more evidence that she built up problems in her head for no reason. As she entered her room and sat down on her bed, she considered what her parents had told her. Of course they were right. She needed to stand up for herself. If an opportunity presented itself, she needed to be ready to take it.

She glanced at the thick plastic helmet sitting on her bedside table. Even in-game, she had been leaning on Frank and Jason. She pulled the VR helmet over her head and laid down on her bed. Perhaps it was time to start carving her own path.



## Chapter 7 - Confronted

Riley and her group continued south from Sibald after they logged back in. As they traveled, the trees around them began to change. Their bark regained its luster and Riley detected leaves sprouting from the once dead limbs. The sky had lightened considerably – the sun threatening to break through the cloud cover.

“I’m so glad we’re done with the kingdom of darkness,” Ethan complained as he lumbered along beside Riley. “I couldn’t see anything, and it was damn depressing.”

“I second that,” Emma added. “Although it did give me an opportunity to level my spells since I had to keep casting the whole time.”

Lucas glanced at Riley, who stayed silent during this exchange. “What about you, Riley? Are you ready to be finished with the Twilight Throne?”

She glanced at him, her brow furrowing slightly. “Who says I’m done? I just have a quest in Vaerwald, and then I plan to go back.”

“Go back?” Emma asked in shock. “What for? There’s nothing but freak creatures in those woods. It’s not even a good leveling spot.”

Riley hesitated. Her three teammates were looking at her skeptically. A clever answer didn’t come to her. “I like it there,” she replied lamely.

Ethan shook his head in puzzlement. “This game takes all sorts I suppose.”

Riley stopped as she caught sight of a bend in the road ahead of them. She pulled her bow from her back and sighted down the length of an arrow, activating *Steady Aim* and *Aimed Shot* simultaneously. Her vision zoomed in, and she could make out the figures ahead of them. Their red robes stood out in stark contrast to the brown and green of the forest around them.

“Who is it?” Ethan grumbled. “Something to fight hopefully. All this walking is unbelievably boring.”

“The fire mages from Sibald,” Riley said softly. She could feel her anger rising again, her dark mana responding immediately and digging its icy claws into her skull.

“Returning with the undead they purchased in town I bet,” Emma added in an indifferent voice. “Let’s keep moving.”

The group kept walking forward, quickly catching up with the band of mages. The group was moving quite slowly, and as they neared the caravan, Riley could see why. They had bound the legs of

the undead with heavy iron manacles, which encumbered their movements. It forced the men and women to shamble along at an awkward shuffle.

*There are almost fifty undead here,* Riley thought in surprise. *They must have purchased more while we were logged off.*

The fire mages barely glanced at the group as they passed. As they neared the front of the convoy, Riley could see the Prefect leading the caravan. He was a large man for a mage – his arms and legs bulging with muscle. His face was thickly bearded, and his eyes shone a crimson red as he continuously channeled his own mana.

One of the women in the chain gang stumbled and tripped, plunging forward and pulling several of the undead with her. The procession screeched to a halt as the woman struggled to rise back to her feet. A frantic look crossed her face and fear danced in her eyes as she saw the mages notice her fall.

“Another delay?” the Prefect’s booming voice rang out. The man turned, a look of irritation creasing his lips. He approached the prone woman, and his eyes burned with anger. “What good are slaves that cannot walk?” he asked menacingly.

The woman bowed her head, not attempting to answer the Prefect’s rhetorical question. Without warning, the man kicked her viciously – his boot knocking her on her back. “Mute and immobile. Perfect. That fat merchant sold me defective goods.” A few of the fire mages around him snickered in amusement.

The Prefect summoned flames around his open palm. Before anyone could react, the fire shot forward like a flamethrower, engulfing the undead woman. Her screams echoed through the forest as the fire consumed her, and the undead behind her shrank back as the flames licked along the metal manacles. Soon little more than a burnt husk was left, its hand reaching feebly for the Prefect – a silent plea for mercy.

“Such a waste,” he muttered and started back to the front of the column.

Riley stopped moving as she watched the scene. Her dark mana pulsed and throbbed in her veins. He had killed the woman for tripping. She couldn’t stand by and let this man enslave these undead. Her parents were right; there were times when you simply had to fight. This was one of them.

Her eyes scanned the mages around her. There were nearly a dozen men and women in the caravan, and most were above level 80. A quick inspection showed that the Prefect himself was level 162.

*I can’t wait and ambush their party. Not only would that be suicide, but it might start a war between the Twilight Throne and yet another neighboring kingdom – especially if I had to use dark magic.*

A glimmer of an idea flitted through her mind. *Maybe there's another way...*

"Let the slaves go," Riley said darkly.

The Prefect turned and looked at her with raised eyebrows. "Do you know who you're speaking to, girl?" he asked scornfully. He eyed her dusty leather gear with an air of arrogance. "I am a ranking member of the fire guild. I suggest you turn around and return to whatever gutter you crawled from."

"I challenge you," Riley declared, her mind clouded with the icy, pulsing sensation of her mana. The energy swept away her other emotions, and only a cold anger remained.

"What are you doing?" Emma hissed, looking at the fire mages around them anxiously. Riley ignored her teammate. Her attention was focused solely on the Prefect.

The man laughed at her. "You should listen to your friend. You think to challenge me? Why should I even bother?"

Riley knew she needed something to make the duel worth the man's while. She could only think of one thing that these fire mages might appreciate. She knew this was reckless, but she was committed. She couldn't stand by while the Kin were butchered and sold into slavery – deserters or not.

She threw back her hood, her blonde hair rustling in the faint breeze that blew through the forest. "I am a founding member of <Original Sin>, a Member of the Shadow Council of the Twilight Throne, and the left hand of the Regent himself," Riley said coldly, her eyes glowing darkly. Black tattoos of energy crawled up her arms and lashed at the air around her as her mana pulsed through her veins. The mages around her backed away, gripping their staves tighter. She could hear her teammates gasp audibly.

The Prefect's eyes widened as he took in her appearance. "I see you understand what that means," Riley continued. "Then how about we make a wager? If you win the duel, the Twilight Throne shall owe your guild a debt. If I win, you free these slaves."

The man regained some of his swagger. "Or, I could simply walk away with my merchandise," he replied coolly.

Riley glanced at the crowd around them. "You could, but then you would be known as the first and perhaps the only Prefect that was too scared to accept a public challenge from the Twilight Throne." She made a show of looking at the man's subordinates who stood around them. Several already eyed their leader with thinly-veiled contempt for questioning the challenge.

The mage's eyes flared with anger as he looked at his cohorts and realized he had been boxed into a corner. "Fine," he spat. "I accept your challenge. I will enjoy returning to our Guild Master with

news that I have secured a favor from your kingdom.”

Riley smiled darkly, shedding her cloak and backing away from the Prefect. She pulled her bow from her back and mentally recalled what she knew of fire mages. He would likely have no teleportation or crowd control abilities. In addition, only the game master had been able to use any type of protective shielding – perhaps that wasn’t common. However, she knew that she shouldn’t underestimate this mage. For some reason, he didn’t seem concerned about fighting an archer.

The Prefect swiped his hand in the air, and a notification crashed into Riley’s vision declaring the start of the duel. With a tap of her finger, she accepted the man’s challenge. A sudden rush of flame surged from the Prefect’s staff, and the mage was engulfed in fiery armor as his staff transformed into a pillar of flame. He choked down on the weapon with his grip and immediately began sprinting toward Riley. Her eyes widened as she saw him approach, a manic smile painted on his face.

*He’s coming into melee?*

Riley backpedaled and drew her bow, channeling dark energy into the arrow. The orb of mana grew rapidly, and she waited a few precious seconds before she released. The bolt streaked through the air and met the mage’s sword with a clash, halting his charge as unholy energy lashed at his flaming armor. The man’s crazed smile grew wider. His staff flared, and the fire pushed back at the darkness.

Riley didn’t stop moving. Arrows raced from her bow in rapid-fire succession as she continued to back away from the mage. He dodged the missiles with almost inhuman reflexes. The bolts that did strike him only barely scratched his skin, the wood swiftly burning away on his armor. Then the Prefect removed a hand from his staff, his fingers dancing in a complicated rhythm.

Suddenly, Riley could feel heat press against her back and singe her armor. Flames erupted in a circle around the pair, effectively trapping her inside a fiery inferno. The mage was cutting off her ability to run. His manic smile grew even wider as he saw realization dawn in her eyes.

Riley abruptly changed directions and darted toward the mage. As she neared him, she dove into a roll. The Prefect’s staff sailed over her head, and Riley could feel the waves of heat rippling from the weapon. She sprang nimbly back to her feet and kept running, sending a silent prayer of thanks to Jerry for his training. The Prefect stumbled, suddenly off balance as he swung wildly through the air.

Once she put some distance between her and the mage, Riley turned. Drawing back on her bow, she felt time slow as she activated *Steady Aim*. The mage turned – his eyes blazing – and rushed at her

again. She was breathing hard and could feel blisters forming along her back where the staff had grazed her. Riley couldn't dodge forever, and she knew her daggers would be ineffective in melee. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the undead that watched her movements with a desperate hope from beyond the flames.

*I can't lose. I'm fighting to set them free.* Riley turned back to the Prefect and his rage-filled face. Her dark mana pulsed in her veins. *I'm fighting to avenge them.*

She drew back on her bow as she summoned dark mana into another *Void Arrow*. This time, she felt a stabbing pain in her chest and noticed her health plummeting. Panicked, she looked at the tip of her arrow and saw traces of red swirling into the black miasma, crimson energy trickling from the bow's crystal roses.

Riley had no idea what was happening, but she didn't have time to question it. As the mage neared her and the pulsating ball of energy expanded, she released. The arrow rocketed through the air and Riley sprinted forward behind it. The mage smirked and arrogantly raised his staff to block the vortex of energy. Yet this time the explosion blasted him from his feet, sending him hurtling backward. He landed with a heavy thud as his staff tumbled to the ground beside him.

Riley didn't hesitate. She leaped forward, using the last of her small mana pool to cast *Blood Mist* on both of her daggers. Her blades sank into the mage's exposed flesh. His flaming armor burned the skin on her hands and caused it to bubble and peel away. Her remaining health shrank rapidly as a blood mist erupted from the mage's wounds, expanding to fill the circle of flames. The droplets of blood landed on Riley's broken skin like cooling aloe, swiftly repairing her broken and burnt flesh.

She could see that her health was beginning to stabilize even as the mage continued to lose hit points. He struggled to reach for his staff, and Riley twisted her blades viciously. She raised one dagger and stabbed down again and again and again. The man let out a tortured scream that echoed through the forest. As his health finally failed, his fiery armor began to fade, flicker, and die.

Then a prompt appeared in Riley's vision, signaling her victory.

Yet Riley wasn't ready to stop. This man deserved worse than this for enslaving the undead. She looked down and saw Alex's taunting face looking back at her. She could feel those horrible dead eyes boring into her – mocking her. She ripped one of her blades from the mage's chest and raised it. She was ready to kill the bastard.

"Riley!" Lucas grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "That's enough. You've won. This isn't the place to kill a fire guild Prefect," he added in a whisper as he eyed the other mages.

Riley came back to herself and glanced around the road. Her dark leather armor was singed and splattered with the Prefect's blood. She kneeled inside a ring of scorched dirt, and her dagger was still embedded in the man's chest, causing a bloody mist to drift and swirl through the roadway.

The other fire mages watched her with wide eyes. Then, as a group, they raised their fists to their chests in salute. A young woman with short-cropped hair approached Riley, flame tattoos encircling her eyes.

"You have defeated our Prefect. We are honor bound to uphold his promise since he is no longer able to do so." The mage glanced contemptuously at the man's body. His bloodied form lay still on the dirt road, his chest rising and falling feebly. His skin had been torn open in multiple places, and his blood drenched the ground.

Riley turned back to the woman. "Good," she said shortly, her dark eyes examining the fire mage. "Release the undead and remove their collars. Then get the hell out of here. If I see you back inside the Twilight Throne's area of influence, I *will* kill you."

The woman nodded respectfully. "As you command, Challenger." Then she hesitated, turning back to Riley. "Not all of us agree with the Prefect's actions. You should not judge us all by his conduct."

Riley looked at the woman in surprise. Perhaps she had been too quick to judge the mages. "What's your name?" Riley asked.

"My name is Flare," the woman responded, bowing her head. "Your strength would be honored in our guild, Challenger. If you are traveling to Vaerwald, do not hesitate to call upon me if you need assistance."

Riley nodded curtly in response, noting the mages hurrying to unbind the undead. Then she turned back to her teammates who stood watching her with an odd mixture of reactions. They seemed uncertain what to say as Riley pulled a health potion from her pack and chugged the contents.

Ethan was the first one to finally speak up, a wide grin on his face. "You're a freaking badass!" he exclaimed with a laugh. "To think we were traveling with a celebrity this whole time!"

## Chapter 8 - ConvolutEd

After the fire guild mages freed the undead, Riley's small group guided them deeper into the forest. The former slaves were shell-shocked and uncommunicative – not that Riley could blame them. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to escort them all the way back to the Twilight Throne. She also didn't feel confident that she could defend the group against the Sibald slavers on her own, even if she did accompany them back to the city.

With few options, she had messaged Frank and asked him to send a few squads of the Twilight Throne's forces to come and retrieve the undead. She also gave him a brief rundown on what had happened to the former slaves so that he could warn the soldiers. The last thing she wanted was to have the whole group end up being sold to the highest bidder. That still left the matter of how to handle Sibald and the other slavers. However, they would have to wait until Jason logged back in to address that issue.

A few hours later, Riley and her small group were making their way farther south toward Vaerwald. The group was marching against an incline, and the forest floor had become rocky and uneven. It had grown colder and more humid. Droplets of water occasionally breached the canopy above them, spattering against Riley's hood and running off her cloak.

For a brief moment, Riley had seen sunlight peek through the clouds before the sky was again obscured. The sun was now tucked behind the large branches of the immensely-thick trees that grew along the road. The only thing she could compare them to were redwoods in the real world. Moss grew thick and green at the base of each tree, and the ground was dotted with ferns in this new moist climate.

She noticed a few waiting notifications in her peripheral vision. Following Jason's example, Riley had deactivated most of the system notifications while she was in combat. They were simply too distracting in the middle of a fight, especially when she was taking on multiple opponents. With a tap of her finger, Riley pulled up her system window and was bombarded by several messages:

**x1 Level Up!**

You have (5) undistributed stat points.

### **x1 Skill Rank Up: Sprint**

**Skill Level:** Beginner Level 7

**Effect:** 8% Increased movement speed.

**Cost:** 5 Stamina / Second.

### **x1 Skill Rank Up: Void Arrow**

**Skill Level:** Beginner Level 7

**Effect:** Charge levels increased to 7. Damage and radius increases by 5% per charge level.

*Odd. I didn't realize I could level off of duels.*

Although, as she considered it, Riley supposed that this made sense. That might not have been a life or death battle, but it had still been quite intense. She doubted people would be lining up to duel repeatedly. Much like experience from training, the system administrators had probably built in a limit on how much you could advance through duels.

Riley held up her bow as she continued her meandering march through the dense forest. Her fingers traced the petals of the crystalline roses, which glowed an eerie red in the gloom cast by the tree cover. Something had happened during the fight with the Prefect, and she suspected it had something to do with the bow.

*Was that piercing pain and red energy its special ability? I haven't unlocked it yet...*

"That bow doesn't seem ordinary," Ethan said from beside her, peering over her shoulder. "The crystals glow, and I could have sworn I saw them pulse a moment ago."

Riley started slightly and glanced at the burly warrior. "I agree. It isn't normal. Actually, this bow is why I'm traveling to Vaerwald," she replied, her eyes returning to the crimson crystals. "I have a quest there."

"Great. The sooner we get there, the better," Emma huffed. "It's dangerous to be traveling with you." She glanced back at Riley with an irritated look. "Do you know what kind of bounty is on your head?"

"Over \$8,000 when I checked online," Ethan supplied with a grin, not waiting for Riley to answer. "Jason is still beating you – by a lot – but yours is still pretty high."

"That's 8,000 reasons why we're probably going to get attacked on a major road," Emma replied. "Every player in the game would be hunting us if they knew we were traveling with her."

Riley tugged on the hood of her cowl, further concealing her face. Maybe there was a way to dye her hair in-game. That might



make it a bit more difficult to identify her. “There isn’t anything I can do about that. As I’ve suggested before, you all could go on without me,” Riley reminded softly.

“We aren’t going to do that,” Lucas replied with a sigh, earning him another glare from Emma. “What?” he asked her. “It just doesn’t seem like the right thing to do. Riley freed a bunch of slaves. That’s hardly the work of some super villain.”

“Besides, that fight was epic!” Ethan added with a smile as he recalled the fight yet again.

“We know!” Emma and Lucas both said at the same time. “Jinx!” Lucas added quickly. Emma smiled at him in response and punched him in the shoulder. As Riley watched the couple, she couldn’t help but think that Emma would be pretty if she weren’t always scowling. Maybe Riley just brought out that side of her. She certainly didn’t seem to be getting along with other girls lately.

“Fine. Fine. I’ll shut it,” Ethan said defensively. “So, what’s the quest about?” he asked.

She was silent for a long moment, considering how to sugar coat it for them. Eventually, she gave up. There wasn’t a great way to soften a revenge story. “The family of the bow’s original owner was kidnapped and murdered by a group of cultists. The quest is to hunt down the rest of the group and eliminate them.”

Ethan’s eyes widened. “What happened to the owner?”

“Dead,” Riley said shortly. “Killed by the same cultists.”

Lucas shook his head. “That’s dark. Why do you think that these cultists are in Vaerwald? The last time we were there, it was just filled with crazy mages.”

“A friend suggested that I start there,” Riley said slowly, remembering Jerry’s advice. Now that she thought about it, his recommendation did seem odd. The undead thief always seemed to know quite a bit more than she expected. He had also been the one to send them to the cultist dungeon north of Peccavi. Perhaps it was just a coincidence.

“He mentioned something about a magical plague springing up within the city,” she continued. “It seemed like a decent lead.”

“A plague, huh?” Ethan asked. “I don’t remember seeing any sick people a few weeks ago.”

Riley shrugged. “Things change fast here. A couple of weeks ago, the Twilight Throne and the Crystal Reach didn’t even exist.”

“I guess that’s a fair point,” Ethan conceded.

The group lapsed into silence as they crested a hilltop. The forest on either side of them thinned noticeably, providing an unobstructed view of the valley that lay below. The tops of the tall trees were visible from their vantage point – their leaves illuminated

in the murky gray light that filtered through the cloud cover. Yet, it was the structure floating above the treetops that caused Riley's lips to part in surprise.

The city was composed of many circular layers that hovered in the sky, towering above them. The metallic edges of the discs glistened in the gloomy light, reflecting a dull bronze glow. Copper tubing connected the various levels – twisting and twining in erratic patterns between them.

“What is that?” Riley asked, already anticipating the answer.

“Vaerwald,” Ethan offered with some amusement at her reaction. “It’s pretty awesome, right?”

“How do you get up there?” Riley asked. From this distance, she couldn’t see how the bottom layer connected to the forest floor.

“Oh, you’re going to love that part,” Ethan said with a grin. Glancing at the group, Riley noticed that even Lucas and Emma looked a bit excited.

The other players led Riley down into the valley. Nearly thirty minutes later, they arrived at a clearing in the trees. Glancing up, she could see that they were standing directly below the floating city. A large podium had been constructed in the clearing. Players and NPCs were milling around the platform in huge crowds. A myriad of bronze tubes stretched into the sky from the podium and haphazardly connected to the city. Riley’s group added themselves to one of the long lines of people waiting in the clearing.

“What are we standing in line for?” Riley asked in confusion.

“Our turn,” Ethan responded as though that explained how they were going to get to the city.

With a frown, Riley decided to be patient. As the line slowly dwindled, she soon found herself standing in front of a rough metal tube. A hole had been carved in the surface, and it was large enough to fit several people standing side by side. A short man sat on a stool next to the tube wearing a pair of worn, orange overalls. He idly tapped a pedestal in front of him with various runes inscribed on its surface.

The small man glared at them with a surly expression. “Where to?” he grunted.

“The fountain,” Lucas replied.

The man snorted indifferently and motioned to the opening in the tube. Riley watched as the others filed inside and followed them with some trepidation. As she entered, her feet clanked on a metal grate mounted in the floor. Riley couldn’t help but glance up. The dark tunnel stretched into the sky, seemingly without end.

“How are we...?” she began but was immediately cut off.

A torrent of air rocketed from the bottom of the tube, and the

group was sent hurtling up through the air. They flew through a dizzying series of tubes and turns – their bodies buffeted by the gale force winds. Riley realized she had been holding her breath, and she forced herself to exhale. As her initial shock faded, she noticed that she wasn't slamming into the sides of the tube even though she could tell that the tunnel twisted and turned frequently.

As quickly as their journey began, it abruptly ended. The group was dumped from the tube, and Riley's feet hit the ground with a thump. With her high *Dexterity*, she managed to stay standing but noticed that Ethan had not fared as well. He had landed hard on his butt and was pulling himself to his feet with an embarrassed expression.

Riley looked around herself in shock and then glanced up. She had been ejected out of the end of an open bronze tube and was now standing in a courtyard with a large group of other players and NPCs.

"Clear the area." Another man in coveralls sat on a stool by the metal tube and groused at her as he motioned for her to move aside.

*What is it about manning these tubes that turns people into such jerks?* Riley wondered sourly, as she moved out of the way. A moment later, another group of people was unceremoniously deposited in the spot she had just occupied.

"So, what did you think?" Ethan asked with a grin. "It's like riding a videogame roller coaster, right?"

Riley smiled. "That was pretty awesome."

"See I told you!" Ethan replied, gesturing at his friends.

Riley took the opportunity to look around. They were standing in a large courtyard, and she could see the bottom side of the next city level floating above her, the metal gleaming in the dull sunlight. Throngs of people moved around her, sitting on benches scattered through the courtyard and buying food from various vendors. It looked much like a modern-day park except for the huge stone fountain that sat in the middle of the square.

Jets of water shot nearly forty feet into the air and then transformed into liquid globes. As Riley looked on in wonder, the spheres twisted and swirled in the air, swiftly creating the image of a horse. The creature neighed and then proceeded to gallop through the air above the courtyard. The equine form rushed near her and Riley reached out a hand, her fingers passing through the water and disturbing one of the globes. As the horse passed, the now misshapen orb she had touched immediately reformed and then the animal dove back into the base of the fountain. Riley watched with a stunned expression, and the cycle soon began again with a different animal forming at the top of the fountain.

"This is what a mage city looks like?" Riley asked in

amazement. The amount of raw mana needed to power the city must be staggering. It wasn't just the energy needed to keep the discs afloat but all the mechanisms that had been built into the city's transportation and water systems. She didn't know how it was possible.

"Pretty much," Lucas replied, his eyes on the fountain. "I think this is my favorite part of the city."

"Mine too," Emma said, grabbing his skinny arm. She seemed a bit more relaxed now that they had made it to Vaerwald. "Why don't we split up from here? Lucas and I need to go check in with our guilds."

Ethan shrugged, causing his mail to clink together. "That's fine with me. I need to go find a weapon trainer. I've got a long way to go to catch up with Riley," he said with a determined expression.

Riley glanced at the group and offered Ethan a half-smile. She wasn't certain where to go from here, but she supposed she could figure it out on her own. She had already asked far too much from this group. "That sounds good. I'll see you guys later," Riley said.

They each waved at her as they headed off in different directions. Riley knew she should start moving, but she was still in shock at the magnitude of the city. Her eyes lingered on the fountain and the swarms of people that crowded the courtyard. She had come here to kill a band of cultists, but how exactly was she supposed to find them?

## Chapter 9 - Thieving

Riley sat at a table outside a small café on one of Vaerwald's lower levels. She had propped her bow against the table and was now nursing a drink as she considered what to do next. She had spent several hours wandering the city and its many levels. On multiple occasions, she had been forced to reveal how much of a tourist she really was by soliciting directions from random NPCs and players.

The city's tube system was designed erratically and followed no discernable pattern. The only way to get to level eight from the fountain was to go down to level three and take a tube up to level seven. Then she had to go up another two levels to nine and back down to eight. The NPCs could rattle off these nonsensical instructions without hesitation. She might memorize the tube system eventually, assuming she had the misfortune of having to live there, but it wouldn't happen anytime soon.

Riley had quickly discovered that a caste system had developed among the various levels. In total, there were twelve discs. From what she had gleaned, the top levels contained the four elemental guilds and some type of palace for the city's council. The middle levels were home to the city's tradesman and merchants. Lastly, the lower levels were filled with the city's slums and poorer districts.

Riley was currently sitting on level one. This was perhaps the seediest part of the floating city. In stark contrast to the glamor of the fountain on level six and the courtyard she had first witnessed, this area didn't boast any popular attractions. The streets were covered in filth, and the people here eyed each other suspiciously as they walked past. Ironically, she somehow felt more comfortable here than she did in the upper levels.

Her fingers drummed against the mug in her hand as she watched hooded NPCs and players tread down the dusty road. Unfortunately, she hadn't made much progress on her quest. She hadn't discovered anyone who was sick, and, when she asked about a plague, the reactions she had received ranged from skeptical to openly belligerent.

"Maybe Jerry was wrong," Riley murmured. She had moved to the lower levels as a last resort, thinking she could gather some information in exchange for coin. As it turned out, that had been a wildly over-optimistic plan. The people here were even more closed-mouthed than on the upper levels and weren't willing to talk to her.

Her thoughts were interrupted as a small boy approached the

table. His clothes were in tatters, and his face and arms were splattered with dirt. "Hello, ma'am," he greeted cautiously, not making eye contact. "Can you spare any coin?"

Riley winced as she observed the boy. Not for the first time, she questioned the realism of AO and its purpose. "Sure," Riley replied. "Let me just grab my pack." She turned away to grab a few coins out of the bag slung at her waist.

A few seconds later, she turned back to find the boy had vanished. She looked down the street and saw his nimble form darting away. "What...?" Riley began and then noticed that the bow resting beside her was gone. Her eyes widened, and she searched the street in the other direction, seeing that another child was racing away with her weapon.

*Damn it, she thought. The boy was a distraction.*

She jumped to her feet and raced down the street after her bow. She pushed aside passersby and nimbly darted between the crowd in the street, catching small glimmers of the child ahead of her. Shouts of angry outrage sprang up behind her, but she had no time to stop and apologize. Riley's *Perception* and *Tracking* skills were a lifeline, highlighting the thief's small form in the crowd.

Then the child darted into a nearby alley and Riley followed. Crude wooden buildings towered beside her, and the narrow space was filled with broken crates and refuse. Riley didn't spare a glance at the trash as she sprinted down the alleyway. She had lost sight of the child at some point, but the kid had to be ahead of her.

The alley abruptly dead-ended into the side of another building, and Riley came to a screeching halt. She glanced around herself in confusion. The thief had definitely come down this alley, and there was nowhere to hide among the broken garbage that littered the ground behind her. She could feel her pulse race and panic crept into her mind.

*Calm down*, she told herself forcefully. She drew on her dark mana and the calming chill swept through her mind, easing her panic.

She inspected the area around her more carefully. The thief had to be here. It was unlikely a street urchin knew magic, so that meant she was probably looking for a more mundane answer. Her eyes fell on the side of the building in front of her. It was built of horizontal wooden slats, and the side of a broken crate leaned against the building.

Riley's brow furrowed as she looked at the decaying wooden panel. Her *Perception* skill triggered and outlined muddy handprints along one side. Walking cautiously toward the wooden structure, Riley gripped the edge and pulled gently. If the child was inside, there was no sense alerting her that she had found her hidey-hole. Behind the

panel was a jagged hole in the side of the building.

Riley grinned menacingly, her dark eyes glowing. She crouched and crept through the makeshift tunnel, and quickly found herself inside a dilapidated building. The walls were rotting away, and the wooden slats on the floor creaked gently as she stepped forward. She could hear the muted voices of people talking and swiftly activated *Sneak* as she made her way forward into the hallway.

“Good job, Bobby,” a girl’s voice spoke up. “That lady never saw us coming!”

“Except that she almost caught you,” another voice responded glumly. “That was a close call, Rose.”

“No one can catch me,” the girl boasted. “I’m the fastest runner in the low streets.”

Riley crept forward slowly, wincing each time the floor squeaked slightly. As she neared the doorway ahead of her, she glanced around the opening. She saw a young girl holding her bow triumphantly and gloating to the dirty little boy that had spoken to her at the café. The girl must have been ten or eleven years old, and the boy was likely eight. Fortunately, there didn’t appear to be an exit to the room.

Dropping *Sneak*, Riley stood straight and positioned herself in the doorway. “It certainly looks like I’ve caught you,” she said in a threatening tone, drawing back her hood to reveal her obsidian eyes. She pulled one of the daggers from its sheath at her waist. She didn’t intend to stab two children, but she did plan to scare the living shit out of them. They shouldn’t have stolen from her.

The boy and girl whirled to look at Riley, their eyes wide. “I told you, Rose,” the boy yelped and jumped back, bumping into the wooden wall of the building. His eyes were fixated on the dagger in Riley’s hand.

To Rose’s credit, the girl eyed Riley defiantly. “You going to kill us?” she challenged. “If so, then do it. You’re not taking Lily’s bow without a fight.”

It was Riley’s turn to look at the children in shock. How did this girl know that the bow originally belonged to someone named Lily? Perhaps she was in the right place after all. Riley lowered her weapon slightly and opened her mouth to respond. Just then, she felt cold steel slide against her throat.

“Drop the dagger,” a woman said from behind her. Riley didn’t have the ability to turn and look at her attacker with the blade pressed to her neck. Without an alternative, she dropped her knife, and the metal rattled against the wood floor.

“These children stole my bow,” Riley said softly. “I didn’t intend to harm them – only to frighten them.”

"It's not your bow, lady," Rose declared, hugging the weapon to her chest. She scowled at Riley with defiant eyes.

The woman spoke from behind Riley, "The girl is correct. I've seen that bow before, and it certainly wasn't owned by you." The dagger pressed more forcefully against Riley's throat, its sharp edge drawing a line of blood.

"I found it in a dungeon north of Peccavi," Riley explained. "The owner had died hunting a group of cultists. Those fanatics are now dead by my hand."

The woman behind Riley seemed to hesitate, and the knife eased on her neck. "Then why are you here?"

"The bow granted me a quest to find the remaining cultists who kidnapped its owner's family," Riley said, wincing at the dull burning sensation at her throat. "A friend of mine suggested I come here."

Riley's explanation was met with a long silence. Rose now looked slightly conflicted, and she glanced between the bow and Riley with a confused, helpless expression. "She's lying," the girl spat. "Lily isn't dead!"

"I'm not so certain," the woman behind Riley muttered. The person holding the blade must have come to a decision because the dagger withdrew.

"You're going to let her go?" Rose demanded. "Just like that?"

Riley rubbed at her throat and turned to look at the woman behind her. She made certain to keep her hands out in the open and not make any quick movements. The woman behind her must have been nearly sixty – her hair a solid gray. Her face looked worn and tired, but her eyes were filled with a steely determination and intelligence as she inspected Riley closely. She held the blade in her hand in a no-nonsense fashion, as though accustomed to its use.

"I am," the woman said with a nod. "Don't worry, Rose. If this stranger tries anything, she will be dead before she draws a blade."

By the woman's tone, she sounded confident she could carry through with that threat. It occurred to Riley that she hadn't heard the woman approach her from behind. A quick inspection revealed no information on the woman, which left Riley puzzled. Normally she could at least determine a person's level.

"I'm certain that your inspection left you puzzled," the older woman said with a smirk. "Perhaps that will give you some pause before you think to challenge me."

"Like I said," Riley replied evenly, "I'm not here to hurt anyone – just to retrieve the bow." She hesitated for a moment. "Let's start over. My name is Riley. Maybe you could tell me your names?"

The older woman's eyes softened slightly. "I'm Marie." She gestured to the two children behind Riley. "You've met Rose and



Bobby. Why don't we move to another room and sit down? Then we can talk for a bit."

Riley nodded curtly. As a show of good faith, she took off her belt and handed it to the woman. "Here are my weapons. That way you know I don't mean any harm," she said as the woman eyed her in confusion. Marie gave her a quick nod of approval.

"Come, Rose," Marie commanded. "Bobby, stop shaking. It's fine, son. No harm will come to you." The boy still trembled nervously against the wall but managed to peel himself from the wood, glancing anxiously at Riley as he edged past.

The group moved farther into the interior of the building, and Riley soon found herself in a kitchen. A stove and fireplace lay against one wall, and a large wooden table stood in the center of the room. Marie gestured for Riley to take a seat. The older woman sat across from her and Rose and Bobby took seats beside Marie. At Marie's order, Rose set the bow on the table and reluctantly recounted how she and Bobby had stolen the weapon from Riley.

As the girl finished her story, Riley spoke up, "How do you all know Lily?"

Marie's eyes took on a troubled look before she could control her expression. "That's a long story," she began slowly. "First, it's important to understand what this place is. I run an orphanage of sorts for the cast-off children of the city." She glanced at Rose and Bobby, and her expression hardened. "Not that I have much control over them." The children looked down at their hands contritely.

"Lily grew up near here," Marie continued. "Her parents did odd jobs around the city – which barely kept the family off the streets. In my occupation, I come to know most of the children in the area, even those that don't live at the orphanage.

"Lily just had a gift with magic." The woman's eyes misted over as she recounted the story. "She was the best of us in many ways. When she was about Rose's age, I managed to get her out of the low streets and used a few connections to find her work at an enchanter's shop on the middle levels. It was the best I could do for her. Admittance to the guilds is difficult for people like us."

Marie's hands idly traced the crystalline petals of the bow. "Lily blossomed there. She had a knack for creating magical items. I remember her first creation was a moving figurine. A wooden rose that would bloom before your eyes." Marie smiled as she recalled the memory.

"I still have the rose," the small girl spoke up, her eyes clouded with a mixture of anger and sadness. "She named me after it..." the girl trailed off, her fingers picking at the wooden table in front of her.

The older woman smiled at Rose. "Lily always helped out

around the orphanage. She never forgot where she came from. In some ways, that was the problem. The low streets never leave a person – not really. She still ran with a rough crowd. As she grew older, she began performing work on the side, unbeknownst to her master. Soon she was making weapons.” Marie gestured at the bow on the table.

“She made this?” Riley asked in astonishment, looking at the bow with fresh eyes.

Marie nodded. “It’s one of the few items she made for herself.” The old woman closed her eyes and continued, “This is also where her story darkens. Her family disappeared one night when she was little older than yourself.”

The woman paused, uncertain how to continue. “After her parents vanished, Lily... she – she lost herself. She began hunting for the kidnappers. She reached out to the darkest members of our community.”

Marie continued, “Lily began training, hunting, and crafting. She also stopped smiling. It was like her happiness had died. All her efforts were focused on finding the people that had taken her parents. Then one day, she simply left without warning and didn’t come back.” The woman’s eyes were focused on the bow, now taking on a glassy appearance.

“And I guess we know now what happened. I just couldn’t help the girl...” Marie said in a sad voice.

Riley sympathized with Marie. It sounded like Lily had been like a daughter to her. As she listened to the story, her resolve hardened. She would find those responsible for Lily’s death and for her family’s disappearance. As she considered this, Riley’s mana responded. The chill energy pulsed and throbbed in her veins, responding to her desire for vengeance.

“Maybe you can find some redemption now,” Riley said. “My friends and I destroyed the cultists in the dungeon where we found this bow. The quest I received indicated that Lily died searching for these cultists. I have taken up her fight, and I intend to find the rest of the group. They will not hurt anyone else,” Riley promised, her eyes glowing with unholy light as she watched Marie.

The older woman glanced up at her in surprise, noticing that Riley was channeling her mana. “Dark mana,” she whispered, a frown creasing her forehead. Then she shook her head. “I see conviction in your eyes, but what hope do you have of finding these men and women?”

“I have a lead. A friend suggested that I come here to look for them and that they might still be in Vaerwald,” Riley explained. “From my previous encounter with the cultists, I understand that they

somehow manipulate all four of the elemental affinities. My friend also mentioned a magical plague that was afflicting the residents of this city.”

Marie’s eyes widened. “How would he know about such a thing?”

“So, it’s true?” Riley asked, excitement in her voice. It wasn’t that she wished ill on anyone, but the fact that she was making any sort of progress after her fruitless afternoon gave her hope.

“It is,” Marie said. Riley noted that both Rose and Bobby looked nervous at the mention of a plague. “Perhaps I should show you.” The old woman grabbed the bow and stood. She guided Riley through the maze-like, ancient structure. They passed numerous young children in the halls that looked at Riley with confused and curious expressions.

On the far end of the house, they arrived at a closed door. Marie retrieved a key from her pocket and unlocked it. Then she turned to Rose and Bobby who had tagged along behind them. “Go on children. You shouldn’t see this.” The pair reluctantly complied and backed away down the hallway.

Marie pushed the door open gently and stepped through, Riley following closely behind. Once they were through, the older woman closed the door and relocked it. Riley’s attention was focused on the children lying on cots throughout the room. They each lay on their backs as their chests rose and fell feebly. Their eyes were open, and they stared straight at the ceiling.

It was their eyes that captured Riley’s attention. They were lit up in a rainbow of colors based on their affinities – as though they were channeling their mana. Crimson, emerald, sapphire, and amethyst glowed in the darkened room. Their eyes bled glowing tears that dripped slowly down their cheeks and collected in buckets beside the beds.

“What is this?” Riley asked in a horrified voice.

“The plague you mentioned,” Marie responded quietly. “They do nothing but lay there. Their bodies are slowly fading, even as tears of liquid mana drip from their eyes. That liquid is worth its weight in gold in this city, but it is also slowly draining them dry.”

“Why doesn’t anyone else know of this?” Riley asked in confusion. “I questioned a number of people today, and no one knew anything.”

Marie sighed. “For now, the sickness seems to be isolated to the children of the low streets. The guilds have been warned and have dismissed the problem. Like with most issues here, they let us fend for ourselves. The illness seems to affect those with high elemental affinities the hardest – those who are untrained in particular.”

The older woman moved beside a child, grabbing a cloth from

a nearby table. She dabbed at the boy's cheek, where the tears had left dark stains. "The sickness is spreading, though. I recently heard rumors of victims on level two."

Riley's mind tumbled as she looked at the children. What could be causing this? Were the cultists responsible? If so, how? Or more importantly, why? She couldn't come up with a ready explanation. She forced herself to take a deep breath and think logically. Maybe she should treat this like a real-world plague.

"Who were the first to suffer from the sickness?" Riley asked.

Marie responded in a subdued voice, "I understand that these were the first victims. Several have already died."

Riley's mental cogs began turning. "That means that these children were probably part of the first group that was exposed to whatever is causing this." She turned to the older woman. "Do they have something in common? What were they doing before they got sick?"

Marie's brow furrowed, her hands straightening the fabric of her tunic as she thought. "The guilds," she finally murmured. At Riley's questioning glance, she elaborated, "The children often act as runners for the Great Library. They make some coin by ferrying scrolls and books to guild mages that are too lazy to retrieve them on their own."

Riley was not entirely surprised by the answer. She didn't have a good impression of the city's mages, at least if the fire mage Prefect was representative of the men and women that frequented those guilds. The fact that they hired low-born children as their servants wasn't a shock.

"It sounds like this library might be a good place to start then," Riley said. As soon as she finished speaking, a blue notification appeared in front of her.

### **Quest Update: Violent Vindication**

You have traveled to Vaerwald and discovered that there is some evidence of a magical plague afflicting the children of the lower levels. There may be some connection between the plague and the Great Library. You will need to continue to follow the trail.

**Difficulty:** A

**Success:** Kill the cultists responsible for the death of Lily's family.

**Failure:** Unknown

**Reward:** Unlock Vendetta's special ability. Other rewards unknown.

“Perhaps,” Marie replied, as Riley swiped the notification away. The older woman looked at her closely as though considering something. Then she handed Lily’s bow over to Riley. “You will need this. Lily would have wanted you to have it. You have a similar fire in you.”

The woman hesitated for a moment, before continuing. “I also can’t help but think that this plague has some connection to the reemergence of dark mana. The way this sickness spreads...” she trailed off, her eyes on the children.

Marie glanced back up at Riley. “But this is merely the guess of an old woman so take it for what you will. If you need any assistance, you need only call on me. I may be the matron of an orphanage, but I have lived in the low streets most of my life. I know others here that are not afraid of the shadows or to take a stand against these cultists if they are responsible – especially if their own children are at risk.”

Riley returned her gaze. “Thank you,” she said. Her obsidian eyes turned to the unmoving children and watched their chests feebly rise and fall. “I promise you that I’ll find whoever is responsible for this, and, when I do, their time in this world will be short lived.”

# Chapter 10 - Fated

After Riley left the orphanage, she received a short message from her group explaining that they were gathering at the fountain on level six. She immediately pulled up her group menu, intending to drop the party and continue the quest on her own. Yet, she hesitated. She might need these people. She had no idea what she would be looking for in the library and, if the city had been infiltrated, she might be up against an unknown number of cultists.

The bottom line was that she needed help.

With a sigh, Riley closed the menu and began the long march back to the fountain. This time she only had to stop three or four times to ask for directions. After her first attempt at navigating her way through the city earlier that day, it was nearly a record. In between marching from one bronze tube to another and flying through an erratic maze of metal tunnels, Riley received a chat invitation from Frank:

**Frank:** Hey, Riley. It's been a day or two, and I still haven't heard anything from Jason. Has he messaged you?

**Riley:** Nothing. This is strange for him. Have you tried calling his number or his aunt?

**Frank:** I tried both and no answer. I'm thinking about going over to his aunt's house this weekend to see if he's okay.

Riley frowned. She could feel an odd sensation settle in her stomach. For some reason, she couldn't shake the thought that something was wrong. Hopefully, she was just leaping to the worst possible conclusion.

**Riley:** I think that's a good idea. Let me know what you find, okay? Feel free to call me when you do get in touch with him.

**Frank:** Will do! Talk to you later.

Riley terminated the chat session and swiped away the screen in front of her. She might just be overreacting. Maybe Jason was dealing with an issue with his new school or his parents had come back into town. She hoped that was all it was.

Her morose thoughts followed her as she arrived at the fountain. Mages in multicolored robes walked through the square as enchanted animals raced through the air above the jets of water streaming from the fountain. Riley stood for a moment and stared at the water as it evolved into various creatures. It was mesmerizing to watch, and it made her feel slightly less anxious.

*I can't do anything about Jason right now. For all I know, he's perfectly fine. I just need to focus on this quest and on how to convince the group to help me.*

Riley approached a bench near the fountain. She wasn't certain that this last goal was going to be easy. Emma seemed to hate her for whatever reason. Riley guessed that it had something to do with her own insecurities over Lucas. Ethan would probably go along with it since he seemed okay with doing anything that involved an "epic fight." Lucas was hard to read. He seemed sympathetic, but she also felt like he was easily swayed by the other two.

"Hey there," Ethan said, striding up to her. His large two-handed sword still swung from his back and his mail clinked gently as he walked.

"Hi, Ethan," Riley replied. "How did the training go?"

The burly warrior grimaced. "I basically got physically beaten for a few hours. On the other hand, I gained a new ability, a few skill levels, and some stats. So, it was worth it?"

"The other two here yet?" he asked, his eyes closed as he rubbed at his temples.

"We're here now," Emma said in a haughty tone from behind them. She walked with a purposeful tread, Lucas in tow. Riley noticed that the air mage had a sullen expression plastered on his normally even-tempered face and he sulked behind Emma.

"Did you manage to get some new spells?" Ethan asked, not noticing the tension in the air between the two.

"One of us did," Emma said, glancing at Lucas. "I learned a spell that increases a person's damage for a time, a group healing spell, and an aura that weakens evil alignment creatures." At this last part, Emma glared at Riley.

*I get it. You don't like me.*

"Those all sound useful," Riley replied diplomatically, trying to

take the high road. This just earned a slight huff from Emma in response.

“What about you Lucas?” Ethan added. The mage had slumped down on a bench across from them and was staring dejectedly at something in his hand.

He snorted softly. “Nothing new. I didn’t have a high enough affinity for air magic, even after raising my character level. One of the Prefects told me to search for my inner *happiness*.”

“What does that even mean?” Ethan asked with a rumbling chuckle.

As Lucas stared at his hands, his brow furrowed in irritation. “Who knows? Of course, I tried to get him to explain, but he said I need to learn to live in the moment. Everyone in that stupid guild just sits around all day gambling and drinking. Is that supposed to be happiness?”

Riley was a bit puzzled as well. She knew that the magics were keyed to certain types of emotions or personality traits. For example, dark magic fed off desire. If she embraced the things she wanted to do, her affinity increased slowly. This was the first she had heard about air magic being based on happiness. “So, what exactly did they tell you to do?” Riley asked. “How do you improve your affinity?”

“Apparently, I need to act more spontaneously. ‘The key to happiness is living in the moment.’ The old man just kept repeating that line,” Lucas said, trying to imitate a haughty old man. “I just wanted to shoot lightning bolts – not attend a self-help seminar.”

Riley put a hand to her mouth to muffle a laugh. It did sound like some of the stuff in her dad’s books and seminars. He was always telling people to seize the moment and to be *present* in their lives. She had even attended one seminar where a speaker had told everyone to say “yes” to every offer made to them for the next week. It seemed like a good way to ruin your week in her opinion, but she couldn’t ignore the droves of people who claimed they had found *happiness* that way.

Ethan watched Lucas’ slumped form, laughter dancing in his eyes. “You probably *could* afford to lighten up a bit. You’re all somber and serious most of the time anyway. A bit of spontaneity might be good for you.”

“Lucas is just fine the way he is,” Emma said, sitting beside the mage and patting his arm. He just glanced at her with an irritated expression.

“Well, the other mages disagree,” Lucas retorted. “They gave me this.” He held out his hand, revealing a silver coin in his palm. “I’m supposed to use it to make all my decisions for a few days.”

Ethan slapped his thigh and laughed. “Now that’s more like it! I



just need to think of some good questions for you. Do you want to go fly a kite? No, how about... Do you want to slay a dragon? Hmm, maybe go slap that girl's ass!"

Emma glared daggers at Ethan. "You're not helping."

"That's a matter of opinion," the warrior replied with a grin.

Riley glanced at the coin in Lucas' hand. She certainly had a proposal for them. "I might have a better suggestion than dragon slaying or sexual assault," she interjected with a dry tone.

"What do you mean?" Lucas asked, raising his head to look at her.

"You know how I mentioned that I was here hunting cultists? Well, I think I might have a lead. I found some of the victims of that magical plague I mentioned. Right now, it's limited primarily to the people on the lower levels."

"You mean that the sick people are all on the slum levels?" Emma asked. "I'm not so sure if I would call that a problem. Have you seen that place?"

Ethan nodded, his expression conflicted. "Those aren't the nicest parts of town. Even travelers sometimes get murdered and robbed down there."

"It's not limited to the low levels," Riley replied evenly. "The sickness is spreading." Her expression darkened as she recalled the orphan children she had seen, their colorful eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. "Besides, there are sick children too. They aren't all thieves and murderers down there."

"Okay, so there are some sick people," Emma replied while rolling her eyes. "What sort of lead is that?"

Riley forced herself to take a deep breath. Emma was probably just defensive after the discussion about Lucas. "I think the connection between the original children who caught the disease is that they were all running errands for the library. Maybe we should start by investigating there."

Ethan clapped his hands together, an excited grin on his face. "Sounds like a plan to me. Riley always stirs up trouble, so at least it's guaranteed to be fun. Hell, we've already been attacked twice!"

"Have you forgotten the part where there's a bounty on her head? She's also clearly pursuing a high-level quest. Come on, a city-wide plague?" Emma asked rhetorically.

"So what?" Ethan retorted. "Jason conquered a city within the first week of the game launch. I've also been playing long enough to realize that levels aren't everything."

"Stop it," Lucas said, his voice a little too loud. When he saw he had their attention, he suddenly looked uncertain. "I'm seizing the damn moment, okay? We should just let the stupid coin decide." He

held out his hand for the group to see.

"Lucas, I don't see why..." Emma began.

"I am going to flip this coin," Lucas interrupted her. "If it lands heads, I'm going to help Riley. You can stay here if you want, Emma. If it lands tails, we'll go do something else."

Emma looked at Lucas in shock but held her tongue. "Good," Lucas said, seeing that no one was going to challenge his plan. He lifted his hand, staring at it for a long moment. Then he flicked his thumb, and the coin flew up into the air. The group watched with bated breath as it flipped end-over-end.

Riley watched the coin carefully as it spun through the air. Right before it slapped against the palm of Lucas' hand, she caught a glimmer of blue along the edge of his robe as her Perception skill triggered. Her eyes widened slightly in surprise.

"Don't leave us in suspense," Ethan exclaimed. "Is it heads or tails?"

"Heads," Lucas said, pocketing the coin. "We help Riley."

Emma glared at her as though she was somehow responsible for this decision, but Riley had the wisdom to keep her mouth shut. She certainly didn't want to rock the boat. She anticipated she would need all the help she could get.

"Fine then," Emma grouched. "I guess we're going to the library." She stood and began walking to the bronze tubes along the side of the square without turning to see whether they were following her.

A grin was plastered on Ethan's face as he glanced between Riley and Emma's back. "Don't know what her problem is. This is going to be awesome." He stood and strode after the light mage.

Riley rose slowly from the bench and grabbed her bow. Lucas still sat across from her, staring at his closed fist. Riley paused as she passed the air mage. "You cheated on that throw, didn't you?" she asked. "I saw your free hand moving beneath your robes."

Lucas didn't react immediately. Then he glanced up at her with a small smile. "I'm supposed to learn to seize the moment, right? If that's the case, then I'm going to do it on my own terms. Screw those mages."

Riley didn't respond. She returned the mage's grin. "Fair enough. Let's get started." She offered the mage a hand up, and he accepted gladly. This exchange didn't go unnoticed by Emma, who stood near the metallic tubes leading to the city's upper levels.

# Chapter 11 - Studios

Riley and her group stood on level ten. The number of mages in this area had increased dramatically. She noticed far fewer plain-clothed NPCs and players walking among the tides of colorful robes. This was the highest level of the city that she had visited. It felt like the clouds drifting through the sky had grown considerably in size, and a stiff breeze now swept through the streets.

The group weaved their way among large stone buildings, Emma leading the way with a steady step. This level had a strangely collegiate air, reminding Riley of the Ivy League schools she had visited while scouting universities with her parents. The structures were ornate brick and stone affairs. Many buildings sported large stone columns and scrollwork had been carved into the surface of the pillars. While some of the structures appeared to be the homes of the city's upper-class magic users, others seemed too large to be personal residences.

The street they were following eventually opened into a large square courtyard. On the other end, a massive building had been erected. "So, this is the library?" Riley asked as they approached the enormous building. It towered over the group – six massive stone colonnades lining the front of the structure. Each column represented an affinity, a glowing symbol carved into its surface. Riley noticed that the pillar representing the dark affinity had been burnt, its symbol obscured under scorch marks.

"Technically, most of this *level* is the library," Emma said. "But some of the city's elite also live nearby of course."

"Most of this level," Riley echoed in shock, looking at the buildings behind them from a new perspective. "So what's so important about this building ahead of us?"

"It's the central library. Most people refer to it as the *Great Library*," Lucas elaborated. "Many of the other buildings we passed are satellite libraries that house specific categories of books and scrolls. Apparently, it was too much to condense into one place."

Riley was struggling to visualize that many books, but she decided she would have to take Emma and Lucas at their word. The group trudged up the marble steps to the library and entered a set of open double doors. As Riley stepped inside, she found herself in a large hall; a vaulted ceiling hung over her. The surface was painted to resemble the night sky and faintly glowing lines traced foreign constellations among the stars.

*This game's attention to detail is amazing*, Riley thought – not for the first time.

“Miss?” Riley turned quickly and caught sight of a young man dressed in a plain brown robe. “You have to pay the toll,” he said gesturing to an obelisk near the door. Riley had blithely walked past and into the large hall without noticing him. The others looked at her in surprise.

“The toll?” Riley asked in confusion. She was beginning to feel like a country bumpkin in this city. It had so many rules, which everyone else seemed to know off the top of their heads.

“Yes, miss,” the man replied politely. He had light brown hair, and freckles dotted his cheeks. He had one of those faces that made it hard to place his age. He could have been anywhere from eighteen to thirty-five.

“Here, let me show you,” Emma said, rolling her eyes at Riley’s ignorance. She placed her hand on the pedestal and channeled her light mana. Her eyes quickly shifted to a glowing white and ribbons of ivory energy cascaded from her hand and into the stone.

Noticing Riley’s confused expression, Lucas spoke up, “The library and guild halls within the city all charge tolls to enter. This is what powers the city’s utilities – things like the tubes and the fountain for example. Think of it like a tax. Your mana regens, so it isn’t a huge burden.”

Riley eyed the stone skeptically. She wasn’t keen on giving her mana to the library, especially with a magic plague on the loose. However, she didn’t see much choice. Riley approached the stone, pushing back her hood slightly and channeling her dark mana. She could soon feel the familiar frigid cold seep into her bones.

The brown-robed young man’s eyes widened when he saw Riley approach, and he quickly raised his hands to ward her off. “I’m sorry miss, but you can’t pay the toll with dark mana.”

Riley sighed. Of course she couldn’t. She could only imagine what the young man was going to tell her next.

“Our city doesn’t have any facilities that require dark mana, and, due to their rather chaotic actions, the dark guild is no longer offered a place within Vaerwald. I’m afraid one of the others will need to cover your toll.” It was Lucas’ and Emma’s turn to grimace.

“Great,” Emma muttered. “We have to help her *and* pay her way.”

“You should be used to it by now,” Ethan replied, grinning broadly. “You’ve had to pay the toll for me for a while now.” He turned to Riley. “There’s not enough juice in me to light up a street lamp,” he explained with a rumbling chuckle.

While Emma and Lucas offered mana to the pedestal, Riley’s

eyes searched the interior of the hall. At the far end lay another set of wooden doors, but she didn't see anything yet to indicate that this was a library. Then a thought crossed her mind, and she turned back to the brown-robed man.

"You work here, right?" Riley asked.

He smiled good-naturedly and nodded. "Of course, miss."

"Great. We're looking for the person that's responsible for hiring runners to bring scrolls and books to the other mages. I understand that the library engages children from the lower levels to perform these tasks."

The young man nodded again. "That we do. I often handle this responsibility when I'm not manning the door."

"Great," Ethan said enthusiastically, clapping his hands together again. The sound echoed loudly through the stone hall, and the young man stared at him with a pained expression. "You're just the person we're looking for then..." Ethan trailed off, realizing he didn't know the man's name.

"My name is Clarence, sir," the man replied with the same unflappable politeness.

"Clarence then," Ethan said. "We have some questions for you."

"I would be happy to assist you. Please give me just a moment to attend to the other guests; my shift at the door is nearly over." Clarence gestured for the group to move to one side while he assisted another patron who was waiting her turn to pay the library's toll. In the time it had taken them to speak to Clarence, a small line had already formed behind them.

The group shuffled off to the side, and, a few minutes later, Clarence was replaced with another brown-robed young woman who took over his role herding the guests into the library. The young man approached the group again. "My apologies for the delay. You were asking about the children we use as runners?"

"Yes," Riley replied. "We would like to know where those children have been sent recently."

"Why do you need this information?" Clarence asked. "If you don't mind my asking, of course."

Riley had to think fast. She didn't want to just blurt out "magical plague." From her experience, the game required a bit more tact than that. "One or two children have gone missing, and some of the townsfolk on the lower levels hired us to find them," Riley explained cautiously. The other members of the group looked at her askance but held their tongues.

"Ahh, that is a desperate circumstance indeed," Clarence said, yet his expression still stayed entirely neutral. Riley was beginning to wonder if he was an emotional eunuch. "In that case, why don't I lead

you to the registry room? We keep a log of the runners we hire, the items they check out, and the recipients.”

“That would be great,” Riley said gratefully.

“Follow me then,” Clarence replied, starting toward the set of double doors on the far side of the hall. “Please do not wander too far,” he explained over his shoulder. “It’s easy to get lost among the stacks in the Great Hall, and the books like to play tricks on people.”

Riley just shook her head at this warning. She was done asking any more questions.

As they walked toward the door, Ethan spoke quietly, “What was with that story?”

“Would you prefer to tell him we’re following up on the deaths of several children from a magical plague and we suspect that it started here?” Riley whispered.

“Well, when you put it like that,” Ethan replied in a dry tone.

Their conversation was interrupted as Clarence opened the door at the end of the hall and ushered them through. Riley immediately found herself in an immense room. The ceiling towered nearly fifty feet in the air and rows of bookshelves stood in ragged lines, stretching up towards the ceiling. A chaotic assembly of scaffolding had been built along the edges of the shelves to grant access to the upper levels, and brown-robed men and women walked quietly among the stacks.

Riley paused for a moment to gape at the scene. The room was nearly silent. She could just barely hear the flutter and rasp of paper and looked up. Books flapped gently in between the shelves, migrating from shelf to shelf like highly-flammable birds. Realizing that she had been gawking, Riley looked for her group and saw that they had walked farther down one of the towering rows of bookshelves. She hurried to catch up.

Clarence led them through a disordered maze of shelves and books. Riley quickly realized that the openings between the rows were not uniform, creating a patchwork system of passages. In many cases, it appeared that holes had simply been carved into the shelves themselves, probably by a frustrated librarian. In some ways, it reminded her of a nerdy version of the minotaur labyrinth she had explored with Jason and Frank.

As they passed a side passage, Riley heard a strange shuffling sound. Seeing that her group was going to continue along the same row for a few minutes, she walked toward the hole in the shelves and peeked around the corner. She immediately jumped back, her eyes widening.

A creature made entirely of books and scrolls lumbered down the hall to the sound of paper scraping against the tiled floor. It was

vaguely humanoid, standing nearly nine feet tall. However, its body and extremities were a writhing maelstrom of paper. As it moved, the creature picked up scrolls and books, adding the objects to its body. At the same time, it replaced books back on the shelves.

*Some kind of librarian golem?* Riley wondered. Shaking her head, she moved back into the row of books and jogged to catch up with the group.

They eventually found themselves at a small administrative office located at what Riley could only guess was the back of the building. She had lost all sense of direction with the twisting route Clarence had taken through the stacks. The brown-robed man opened the door to the office with a small key that he pulled from beneath his robes and stepped inside. A globe of light immediately lit the interior, revealing an orderly office. In contrast to the chaos of the stacks, every piece of paper was neatly piled and labeled.

Clarence moved to a desk along the far wall and flipped open a large book. "What time frame are you looking for?" he asked Riley over his shoulder.

"Uh, probably the last couple weeks," she replied, mentally face palming for not asking Marie when the children had gotten sick.

Clarence nodded, and his finger ran down the page. "Here we are. Nearly fifty entries for the last two weeks. That's a rather busy schedule in my experience." When he saw the blank looks on their faces, he elaborated, "Most low-level mages live close enough to make the walk to the library, and we only offer the runner service to Prefect-level mages or higher."

Riley nodded in understanding and glanced at the page. She saw a bunch of names she didn't recognize. However, she noticed a clear pattern immediately. A column was provided for the requesting party's guild, and the same name and guild repeatedly appeared – Vindictus, Fire Guild Prefect.

"Vindictus has been requesting this service a lot," Riley said to Clarence. "What books has he been checking out?"

Clarence glanced at the register, quickly skimming the list. "They cover several different practice areas," he said slowly. "These all deal with the use and manipulation of dark mana. That's odd now that I think about it."

Riley didn't think it seemed strange. She had already observed the fire mages purchasing the undead in Sibald. She felt like kicking herself now. She had never stopped to ask what they might be using them for. She turned to her group, "Do you think the fire guild could be connected to this?"

Lucas looked thoughtful. He glanced at Clarence briefly, mulling over how to phrase his response. "Maybe. I wouldn't put it

past them, and they do seem to be a common link. The books on dark magic are also strange.”

“That is an uncommon research topic,” Clarence agreed, his face still passive. “As I mentioned, dark mana does not have a place within the city any longer. There was a... falling out, you could say – many years ago. Dark mana users are known to be unpredictable. No offense to you, miss,” he added, nodding at Riley.

Riley tapped her lips with her fingers. If the Prefect she dueled was representative of the rest of the fire guild, then the other members were likely amoral and ruthless. The only one she had met so far that seemed reasonable was Flare. Perhaps the cultists had infiltrated their ranks? Assuming they were even involved...

“Well, maybe the fire guild is the best place to start looking,” Riley said. “For the missing children, I mean,” she added quickly for Clarence’s benefit.

“Or it’s just a dead end,” Emma groused.

“Hey, it seems plausible,” Ethan said. “We’ve already seen their cruelty in action. Would you really put it past them?” Emma just snorted and crossed her arms in response.

“This sounds like a plan,” Riley said, her eyes shining darkly under her hood. If the fire guild was tied up in this or the cultists were hiding in their midst, she would have no qualms with burning it to the ground. “Let’s go talk to some fire mages.”



## Chapter 12 - Tempered

It took nearly an hour for the group to make it to the entrance to the fire guild. Clarence had been forced to lead them back out of the stacks himself since none of them had been able to keep track of their circuitous path through the towering shelves of books. The librarian had revealed that this wasn't uncommon. With a disconcerting nonchalance, he had gone on to explain that the stacks often moved or shifted over time, as the books migrated through the hall.

Riley and her party now stood in front of a rough-hewn wooden wall on level eleven. Large logs had been embedded into the ground in a long line, the tops of each filed to a point. Red banners were draped from the bulwark and torches lined the walls. Riley had played a few other MMOs, and – in any other game – she would have expected a horde of orcs to live here, not a group of mages.

“This is the fire guild?” Riley asked tentatively, noting that her teammates didn't look surprised at the crude structure.

“The fire mages can be a bit savage,” Emma said with distaste as she eyed the walls.

Ethan grinned at the mage. “Their leadership structure is pretty straightforward. Like we explained back in Sibald, you advance in this guild based on raw strength, and you can openly challenge guild members to duels. The guild apparently destroyed their hall so many times that they just gave up trying to rebuild it. So they live with this half-assed guild hall now,” he said, waving at the structure.

Riley eyed the walls skeptically. She had already observed how reckless the fire mages could be, and she wasn't certain how to proceed. She didn't expect that banging on the gate and shouting about a magic plague was going to work. Perhaps her best move here was to try to find Flare, the woman she had met on the road to Vaerwald. Hopefully, she would be in a talkative mood and could tell them more about why the fire guild was buying undead slaves. Riley still wasn't certain how that could be related to the plague or the cultists, but it was the only lead they had to go on for now.

With a sigh, Riley approached the wooden gate, smacking her hand against the rough surface. “What do you want?” someone shouted gruffly from inside.

Riley looked at the group beside her, and they all shrugged. Ethan pantomimed making a muscle with his arm and took an aggressive stance. Riley interpreted that to mean she needed to be

more abrasive.

“What do you think? I want inside,” she shouted curtly. “Open the gate, or I’ll knock it down.”

A rumbling laugh came from the other side of the wall, and the gate swung open slowly. A grizzled old man with an eyepatch stood in the opening. His muscled arms were crossed, and a red tabard was draped over his shoulder. “Good,” he said as he surveyed Riley and her group. “I was half afraid it was going to be some sissy water mage. I actually convinced a girl to leave yesterday. Can you believe that?”

His gaze lingered on Riley for a moment. “So what do you want with the guild, girl? The flame flickers inside you, but it’s still weak. You don’t strike me as one of our own.”

“We want to speak with Flare,” Riley responded, meeting the man’s gaze evenly.

A smile crept over his face. “The runt? Fine by me. You’ll likely find her at the training pits. Just head straight through the camp. Oh, and make sure to pay the toll. I always forget about that.” The old man motioned at another worn, stone obelisk beside the gate before retaking his seat on a stool nearby.

Riley just shook her head and led the party inside the fire guild. Emma and Lucas paid the toll for the four of them. As they entered the interior of the guild hall, Riley quickly realized that the old man had accurately described it as a “camp.” It was nothing more than a rough assemblage of tents and winding dirt paths. Red flames were emblazoned on the leather of the tents. The material whipped and flapped in the strong wind that swept the upper levels of the city, creating the illusion that the camp was on fire.

“This is worse than I imagined,” Emma said haughtily as they wandered between the tents. Her eyes scanned the rough structures with disdain.

Groups of fire mages lounged around campfires and eyed them with open hostility as they passed. Many had shed their robes in favor of more loose fitting red clothing or had altered the garments by tearing off the arms. They seemed particularly unimpressed with Emma, perhaps detecting her contempt. More than one trickle of flame suddenly appeared under her feet as she passed, causing her to yelp and dance to the poorly-concealed glee of the red-robed men and women around them.

While Emma could be a bit stuck up, Riley couldn’t help but agree with her. The only fire mages she had seen up close were Jason’s zombies, and he usually used them in a mechanical, strategic way. This was her first glimpse of their human counterparts, and they were a rowdy, boisterous lot.

“Are the other guilds like this?” Riley quietly asked as they

walked through the camp.

“Not really,” Lucas responded. “Each guild is pretty unique. For example, if we were in the air guild, you would just see a bunch of people gambling. It reminds me of a real-world casino.” He snorted. “I’ve even heard of air mages picking their new spells at random!”

Riley was quiet for a moment as she processed this. “So dark magic feeds on desire and air magic is based on spontaneity – sort of. What do fire magic users focus on?” she asked, directing her question at Lucas.

“Passion and strength,” he answered bluntly. “That’s all they care about. That’s also the reason they duel so often. Their magic feeds on conflict and aggression. Those aren’t the only passionate emotions of course, but they’re the most common.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Riley said. She had caught more than one fire mage eying her appraisingly. But she noted that no one had tried to light a fire under her feet. They merely watched her with the cool recognition of one predator acknowledging another.

A few minutes later, the group mercifully arrived at what Riley could only assume were the training pits. The fire mages had dug holes into the disc itself, creating several rough circular rings in the ground, each nearly twenty feet wide. Fire mages dueled viciously in the circles, hurling huge balls of flame and clashing with flaming weapons while others watched and heckled from the sidelines. However, Riley observed that no one interfered with the duels that were taking place.

As she watched the battles raging in the pits, Riley could appreciate why the Prefect she had dueled had adopted a melee style. The rings made it difficult to run away or hide. The group wandered through the training area until Riley spotted a woman that looked like Flare standing in the center of one of the large holes.

“You have to fight, runt,” a large man standing at the lip of the pit shouted at her. “We don’t tolerate weakness in our guild.” As Flare glared at him sullenly, the man turned to the mages beside him. “Who’s up for another duel? Journeymen rank and lower for this one.”

Without bothering to respond, a young man smirked and jumped down into the pit. He landed with a thud and a puff of dust before walking to stand in front of Flare. The two eyed each other carefully, but neither moved. Riley inspected Flare and her opponent, discovering that they were each approximately level 60. She had no idea how the ranking system worked in the fire guild, but she assumed that they must be relatively junior members.

Just as Riley was about to ask her group what was happening, the pair erupted in a flurry of movement. Flare darted backward, her fingers racing through an elaborate series of gestures. A shield of

glowing magma engulfed her left arm, and she barely managed to raise the shield in time to ward off a bolt of flame that her opponent had launched at her.

"You can't always stay on defense," the mage on the rim of the pit yelled at Flare. "You better learn to fight back."

Flare's opponent kept launching bolt after bolt at her. She barely managed to keep her shield raised. Under the constant barrage, she was having trouble casting a spell of her own. The occasional bolt splashed her unprotected skin with tendrils of fire, creating welts where the flames struck. Riley watched the scene with a frown. Perhaps Flare was trying to let the other mage run out of mana.

Then the other mage faltered on his next attack. A look of relief passed over Flare's face, and she lowered her arm to begin casting a counterattack. As the shield dipped, the other mage's eyes gleamed viciously. Several thin streamers of flame rocketed toward Flare from behind. The other mage had cast the bolts as his last spell, sending them up into the air, where they then curved and honed in on the female mage.

Flare saw the missiles at the last moment, her eyes widening and her arms raising ever-so-slowly. Yet she was too late, and the darts of flame struck her body, stabbing through her flesh and causing her skin to sizzle and pop. Flare screamed in pain, repeatedly jerking as the needles of flame penetrated her body. The momentum of the many missiles caused her to slam back into the wall of the pit where she then slumped to the ground unmoving.

As the flames in the ring dwindled, the mage on the edge of the pit threw a red bottle at Flare's prone body. "Get up. It's bad enough that this is your fourth defeat of the day, but you need to at least learn to carry your own potions." Flare's hand reached feebly for the bottle and pulled it toward her burnt lips.

"Damn," Ethan muttered. "These people are intense. This is their training program? Maybe I need to go back and apologize to the warrior trainer."

"This is disgusting," Emma said, her gaze on Flare's broken body. "I just don't understand why civilized people would do this."

The burly mage on the edge of the pit overheard Emma's comment, turning and eyeing her with disdain. "We aren't training a bunch of support casters here that can stand at the rear. Fire mages are good for one thing, killing stuff. It might not be pretty to watch, but it's necessary. The first time these men and women see combat shouldn't be in a real fight." He turned to look at Flare, her skin repairing itself rapidly as she drank the health potion. "There aren't any do-overs in a real battle."

Emma lapsed into silence at the mage's gruff response. Riley

also had trouble arguing with the man's logic. Passion and aggression weren't pretty emotions, but they served a purpose. Just like the numbing cold of her dark mana, they allowed a person to ignore their own fear and hesitation. The fire mage had essentially made the same argument as Riley's parents. Sometimes it was necessary to be aggressive.

As her wounds closed, Flare pushed herself to a standing position with a grunt. Her robe had been damaged, long charred slits now dotting the red fabric. With a glare at the mage on the lip of the pit, she grabbed the edge of the ring and yanked herself up and out of the hole.

The fire mage trainer glanced at her dismissively. "I think you've had enough for today. Go rest. We'll start again tomorrow."

Flare grunted in acknowledgement and started to move back into the interior of the camp. "Wait, Flare," Riley called. The mage turned, and her tattooed eyes glared at Riley. Then recognition slowly entered them.

"The dark archer," she said softly. "So, I guess you've decided to take me up on my offer?" she asked.

"Something like that," Riley replied with a slight grin. "We were wondering if we could talk to you for a few minutes."

Flare shrugged. "I guess so. There's nothing left for me to do today. I'll show you to my tent, and we can talk." She promptly led them back through the camp until they stopped in front of a small structure near the edge of the wall. As she held up the tent flap, the group entered the tight enclosure.

The fire mage dropped to the floor, crossing her legs under her and eyeing them suspiciously. "So, what is it you want? I wasn't really expecting you to come here."

"We have some questions about the undead that we saw your group purchasing," Riley replied, sitting down on the floor across from Flare. "Why does the fire guild need to purchase undead slaves?"

Flare eyed Riley carefully. "Are you interested as a representative of the Twilight Throne or for some other reason?" she asked.

Riley hesitated, not certain how much she wanted to disclose. Her party members all held their tongues, deferring to her judgment. "There are some children in the city who have grown sick," Riley began, deciding to level with Flare. She would just have to be cautious about mentioning the cultists.

"The first to catch the illness were runners for the library that were delivering books to a man named Vindictus. Those books all relate to the use of Dark mana, and we think that there may be some connection between the sickness and the undead that the fire guild is

purchasing.”

Flare chewed on her bottom lip in thought. “Vindictus is a guild Prefect. As you probably noticed, I’m not exactly a ranking member of the guild, so I have no idea what they’re doing with the undead.” She hesitated for a moment, before continuing. “But people talk, and I might be able to find some information for you.”

Her gaze hardened and focused on Riley. “I’ll need something in return before I help you, though.”

“What do you want?” Ethan asked gruffly, shifting awkwardly in his mail as he sat on the floor of the tent.

“I want out of this guild,” Flare said shortly. “I heard what the instructor told you about training us for combat. He’s right... in a way. The fire guild does act as a sort of police force for the city and as its frontline soldiers in the event of war. That’s why I joined – to defend Vaerwald.”

She shook her head slowly. “I also understand that some training is necessary, but the reality is that the dueling and squabbling never stops. These people don’t fight in the pits to protect the city; they do it because they *like* it.” She paused, her eyes glazing over as she recalled the last duel. “You saw that other mage in the pit. He *wanted* to hurt me.”

Flare held Riley’s gaze. “I didn’t join this guild to purchase slaves and torture other people. I want out. I want to move to another guild. I want to do something meaningful.”

“That sounds nice,” Emma replied. “But how are we supposed to do that? You know that changing guilds isn’t as easy as snapping your fingers, especially after you’ve already joined one.”

Riley looked at Emma in confusion. She would have to add that tidbit of information to the growing list of things she didn’t understand about this mage city. “You can’t just change guilds?” Riley asked. “That seems like it should be easy.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “The guilds accept new recruits without much fanfare. However, these institutions have been in the city for a long time. If you follow the lore, they’ve actually been here for hundreds of years. There are all kinds of tensions and grudges built up between them. Once you join a guild, the others won’t welcome you with open arms.”

“I know this,” Flare said, glaring at Emma. “Yet those are my terms. If you can at least set up a meeting with another guild, then I’ll investigate why the fire guild is purchasing the slaves.”

Riley didn’t see that they had much choice. Flare was likely their best bet to find more information on the fire guild mages. They didn’t exactly seem like the friendliest group of people, and she doubted her questions would be well received by the higher-ranked

magies. She was at least implicitly accusing them of creating a magical plague.

“Fine,” Riley said, cutting off Emma before she could make another snarky comment to Flare. “What guild do you want to join?”

A look of relief washed over Flare’s face before she could control her expression. “I want to join the earth guild. They seem to value the defense of others more than this group.”

Riley nodded and glanced at the others. “Then I guess we need to go talk to some earth mages. You guys okay with that?”

“Fine with me,” Ethan said nonchalantly. “I’ve never been to the earth guild before.”

Lucas nodded his head in agreement, and Emma just looked away – which Riley decided was the closest thing she was going to get to acquiescence from the light mage. Riley turned back to Flare. “So be it. We will get you that meeting, and when we get back, you better have some information on the undead.”

“Agreed,” Flare replied, holding out her arm.

Riley shook her hand, noting the woman’s firm grip and the determination in her eyes. She didn’t doubt that Flare would keep her word. Riley just hoped she could keep her own promise.

# Chapter 13 - Resolute

The group was walking down the windswept streets of level eleven. As crazy as the organization of Vaerwald was, at least all of the mage guilds were located on a single level. In front of the group loomed a mountainous structure which stood out in stark contrast to the orderly houses that sat in neat rows along the interior of the disc. The cliff face appeared to have sprung up from the disk itself, possibly a product of magic or an original rock formation that the earth mages had repurposed when the city was formed.

As she looked up at the miniature mountain, Riley's hood fell back slightly and a faint drizzle splattered against her face. She wiped the droplets away with one hand before turning to her teammates. "Okay, so this is the earth guild?"

"How'd you guess?" Ethan asked with a sarcastic grin. "Was it the mountain in the middle of a floating city?"

The warrior's smile was infectious, and Riley couldn't help but chuckle. "Fair enough. At least it's a more fitting place for a group of earth mages than the crude camp that the fire mages live in," she replied. "How do we get inside?"

"Over here!" Lucas called out, having circled the structure. He gestured at a spot against the cliff face animatedly.

The group hurried over and found a rather plain-looking door built into the side of the stone wall. "This is a bit anticlimactic," Lucas said. "I'll be honest. I was expecting something more grand and imposing." He glanced at the others. "Have any of you been inside this guild?" They all shook their heads in response.

"I guess we'll just have to see what happens," Riley said. She noticed a metal knocker had been affixed to the door. Reaching forward, she gave it a swing. She didn't expect the gong-like sound that immediately emanated from the door, and she jumped slightly – earning her a bemused expression from Emma.

Nearly a minute passed with no response, and Riley was about to try the knocker again. As she lifted a hand toward the door, it creaked open slowly, and a young man appeared in the entrance. His head was completely shaved, and he wore a green monastic robe. He observed the group carefully before speaking. "Hello, how can I help you?"

"We're here to speak with one of the earth guild Masters," Riley said. She hoped that was the right way to pose the request. From what she had gathered from speaking with her group and the other mages,



each guild seemed to be run by multiple Master-ranked mages with a set of lower-ranked officers called Prefects.

The man's eyebrows rose slightly. "May I ask what business you have with the Masters?"

"It's a private matter," Riley said, hoping this would be a good enough answer to get them in the door. Now that she was actually standing in front of the earth guild, she realized that she didn't know anyone here by name and that this was a complete shot in the dark. Not for the first time, she missed Jason's careful planning. It was easier to play AO when all she needed to do was shoot things.

The man contemplated Riley's response for a moment before pulling the door open and gesturing for them to enter. Tunnels had been carved into the mountain – smooth polished walls surrounding them on either side. Green globes of energy floated along the ceiling of the passageways, casting them in a weak emerald light that reflected off the walls.

"Only one of the Masters is present at the moment," the mage said. "She is currently working at the well. Also, please remember to pay the toll." He gestured at another obelisk near the entrance and Lucas and Emma sighed in unison. Then the man turned to walk down one of the branching tunnels leading away from the main entrance.

"If you don't mind," Riley began hesitantly. "Could you show us where the well is? We've never been here before."

After the fire guild, Riley was expecting an angry retort. Instead, the man simply nodded his head, waited patiently for Emma and Lucas to pay the mana toll, and then changed direction, choosing one of the other side passages. The group followed him through a winding series of tunnels in near silence. The earth mage padded softly in front of them, his feet making barely a whisper on the rock. In contrast, their movements echoed loudly off the stone. For some reason, the earth guild had a library-like feel to it, and Riley cringed at the noise they were making.

The tunnel intersected with larger rooms where groups of green-robed men and women sat cross-legged on the floor. Riley assumed that they were meditating – their eyes were closed, and their chests rose and fell rhythmically. Meanwhile, others had turned the cavern walls into impromptu chalkboards and were drawing arcane symbols and figures on the stone while they whispered to each other quietly. Her teammates eyed the earth mages with incredulous expressions, a bit taken aback after their exposure to the fire guild encampment.

The tunnel eventually dead-ended into an ornate wooden door. Their green-robed guide gestured at the doorway. "The Master is inside." He bowed his head slightly before moving back down the

tunnel. After taking only a few steps, the mage paused, and a small smile curled his lips. "I suggest that you tread carefully. Vivian may not be in the best mood today."

*Fantastic, Riley thought glumly. That should make asking a favor of someone we don't know even easier!*

Riley opened the door and stepped into the small room on the other side. She found herself in a roughly circular room, the walls carved at sharp angles that formed an octagon. A slender young woman stood near the far wall, drawing diagrams on it with a piece of chalk. Riley could see that nearly every square inch of the entire room had been filled with complicated figures and symbols. She noticed a few images that resembled the discs that made up the mage city.

What captured her attention, however, was the stone column sitting in the center of the room. Riley's eyes widened as she saw the pillar. It was almost identical to the well they had discovered underneath the keep in the Twilight Throne, except this one gave off a strong emerald glow.

*There are more of these wells?* Riley wondered.

The young woman muttered under her breath as she wiped away a group of figures with her sleeve, "With a current power conversion ratio of 96.783%, we would need 3,456 magi..." She lapsed into silence for a moment, staring at a column of numbers beside her diagram.

Riley cleared her throat, and the woman whirled. "Who are you?" she asked bluntly.

It took Riley a moment to form an answer. The woman before her was beautiful. Her hair was a rich brown that glowed in the green light of the room and her naturally olive complexion gave her an otherworldly appearance. Yet it was the green waves of energy cascading from Vivian's body that made it difficult to speak. Riley felt like the gravity in the room had increased tremendously, and she struggled to stay on her feet.

"We came to speak with one of the earth Masters," Riley finally managed to croak, as her legs buckled. It felt like she couldn't breathe and stars began to appear in the corner of her vision.

Vivian's eyes widened slightly as she saw that the group was slowly sinking to their knees. "Ahh, my apologies." She waved her hands and the green aura of energy surrounding her diminished. The oppressive sensation quickly disappeared.

"What was that?" Riley asked as she caught her breath. Her teammates hadn't fared much better, especially Ethan, who was carrying much more gear than the rest of them. He glared at the earth mage openly from where he knelt on the floor.

The woman raised a single eyebrow. "I was working on the

city's gravitational containment fields before you interrupted me. You're lucky the group of you aren't a puddle of flesh staining my floor right now."

"Gravitational containment fields?" Riley echoed dumbly. She expected she was about to learn another possibly terrifying bit of information about the mage city.

"Yes," Vivian responded curtly. Her manner was no-nonsense and clinical despite her flawless appearance. "Though I suppose you wouldn't know what we do for the city. Not many do or care to understand it. Have you ever wondered how the discs stay afloat?"

"Uhh..." Riley began.

"Of course you haven't. It's just a *magic* city after all." Vivian's otherwise impassive tone took on a note of sarcasm and irritation, and she pressed a hand to her temple. "Earth magic includes the ability to manipulate an object's mass. In short, this grants us the ability to manipulate gravity. It takes an incredible amount of energy to do so and is beyond most mages' abilities – at least alone. Hence, the well," Vivian said, gesturing at the stone column in front of her.

"Most of the guilds seem to forget that the floating discs are our most important line of defense. Honestly, who could successfully attack a floating city? Yet they barely give us enough energy to keep the structure in the air." Vivian glanced at the well, her serene face cracking slightly in frustration.

The earth mage looked back up at Riley, her brow furrowing. "But I suppose that's all beside the point. Why are you here?"

Riley glanced at her group for support, but they all looked away quickly. Apparently, they had no interest in requesting a favor from the beautiful woman who could squash them like a bug. "We came on behalf of a friend with a request," Riley began tentatively.

Vivian sighed, leaning against the wall of the small room. "Of course. What would you ask of me?"

"One of the fire guild mages wants to join the earth guild. We offered to speak with an earth guild Master to see if you would be willing to accept her into your guild," Riley said, trying to put a good spin on it.

Vivian eyed her skeptically. "You just *volunteered* for this task? I suspect that's unlikely. However, let's put aside whatever your own motivations are. Why should I accept a hot-headed fire mage into my guild? Do you even know what it takes to cultivate earth magic affinity?"

Riley gave a mental sigh. Of course she didn't. She decided to just own up to her own ignorance of the matter. "I don't."

"Our affinity cultivates *peace*," the woman explained. She noted their confused expressions. "I see you don't understand. That's not

unusual. I am not describing the peace between nations or freedom from conflict. What I mean is that we seek inner peace.”

Riley was still confused. That seemed like a nebulous concept to her. From what she had observed, a person’s actions influenced their affinity. What type of behavior would translate to inner peace?

Vivian watched the group critically, letting out a soft sigh when she realized they still weren’t getting it. “The trick to inner peace is to strip away emotion, cultivating discipline and logic. This is why you may have noticed that many of our members meditate.” She gestured at the figures lining the walls of the small room. “And why we prefer arithmetic and planning to the more chaotic jumble of activities enjoyed by the other guilds.”

The woman looked at Riley evenly. “The fire affinity is almost the polar opposite of our craft. The fire mages don’t know the first thing about discipline. They certainly don’t lack enthusiasm, but they only understand how to act recklessly. I’m assuming you’ve seen their training pits?” she asked with a note of rhetorical disdain.

“We have,” Riley agreed. “But I can say that Flare is different. She doesn’t fit in among the fire guild members, and she wants to find a place where she can better serve and protect the city. That seems like an admirable goal.”

Vivian waved dismissively. “Nice words, but here we value actions. For example, look at how I continue to maintain this city even though our guild will receive no thanks for it. The other guilds don’t seem to appreciate how difficult it is to become an earth mage. We have the lowest initiation rate of any of the five guilds in Vaerwald...” Vivian trailed off, her gaze troubled as she watched the emerald energy dancing in the well.

Then her brown eyes lifted and scanned the group in front of her. Her fingers tapped at her lips in thought. “Perhaps I can show you an example. You cannot appreciate our craft unless you experience it yourselves. If one of you passes our trial, I will offer your friend an opportunity to join our guild.”

“Your trial?” Lucas finally spoke up.

Vivian eyed Lucas appraisingly, seeming to look through him for a moment. “Unlike the air mages, our requirements for advancement are a bit more stringent. You won’t find any wine or song here. All earth mages are required to undergo the trial to advance from novice to journeyman. It is similar to an obstacle course I suppose. What do you say? Do you accept my challenge?”

Riley looked at her teammates and was about to volunteer when Ethan spoke up. “I’m made of some pretty tough stuff, lady,” he declared, thumping his mailed chest with a fist. “I can handle your trial.”

“You don’t have to,” Riley said. “This is my quest.”

Ethan just looked at her with a grin. “I’ve been getting bored with all this talking anyway. It’s about time I got to see some action.”

Vivian watched this exchange with an impassive expression. “Fine, then. Let me show you the way to the trial chamber.” As she passed Ethan, she patted him on the shoulder. “You might want to take some time to prepare yourself for this. Our novices usually meditate for several days before undertaking the challenge.”

Ethan snorted at the slender woman as she walked away down the tunnel. Yet Riley noted that some of his bravado had faded. As he watched Vivian walk away, his hand clutched reflexively at his tunic. Riley suspected he might be questioning what he had gotten himself into.

# Chapter 14 - Masochistic

Riley was standing on a balcony overlooking a large cave. The room was faintly lit and even her *Night Vision* had difficulty penetrating the blanket of darkness that hung over the floor of the cavern. Her teammates stood nearby as Vivian fiddled with a rune-inscribed panel along the edge of the balcony. Her fingers darted across the symbols, and they soon lit up in a technicolor display.

Vivian glanced over shoulder after she had accomplished whatever preparations she felt were necessary. "Are you ready?" she asked Ethan with a raised eyebrow.

"Ready for what? You haven't explained what I'm supposed to do in this *trial*," the burly warrior replied, crossing his arms in front of him.

"I suppose you're right," Vivian said, cocking her head. "The goal is to get to the finish line. Of course, there are a few rules. Rule number one, you can't bring any weapons inside with you. Rule number two, you can't harm any living creatures you encounter in the trial."

Vivian watched Ethan carefully, her brown eyes seeming to look through him for a moment. "You also won't be able to die inside the arena. However, we've heightened the pain experienced by anyone inside the trial area by 200%, a feature added by our dark magic brothers and sisters before they left the city." Vivian glanced at Riley knowingly.

"200% pain feedback," Ethan echoed, his face paling.

"You don't have to do this," Riley urged him. "I can run the trial myself."

"She should be the one doing this anyway!" Emma added in an irritated voice. "This is her stupid mission. I don't see why you need to get involved." Lucas just kept his mouth shut, his eyes worried as he watched them bicker.

"I doubt this will be easy," Riley continued softly, glancing at Emma where she fumed beside Lucas. "If it's a journeyman level challenged, it's probably designed for people above level 70."

Ethan looked even more worried at that comment. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, shaking his arms to relieve some tension. Then he opened his eyes, and a look of determination settled on his face. He pulled his two-handed sword from his back and dropped it to the floor with a metallic clang and began removing his bags and excess equipment.

He looked at his teammates each in turn. "I'm going to do this," he said sternly.

"Are you sure?" Lucas finally spoke up. He looked uncertain.

"Definitely," Ethan said, a cocky grin creeping across his face. "I heard that the earth mages were a bunch of wimps anyway," he added for Vivian's benefit. This earned him another arched eyebrow from the beautiful mage.

Ethan turned to Vivian. "Can I keep my armor?"

The woman arched an eyebrow at him and smirked. "You *can*, but I wouldn't suggest it."

Riley shook her head in frustration at the earth mage's unhelpful advice. It was clear to her that Ethan had decided to do this so she might as well help him if she could. "I expect you will need to move quickly," Riley suggested. "This doesn't sound like it's about fighting so much as getting to the end as soon as possible. You will run faster if you aren't carrying as much weight."

The warrior nodded. "That makes sense." He promptly shed his armor until he was dressed in only a loose cloth tunic and trousers. Leather boots still covered his feet, but he would be largely unprotected in the trial.

Vivian watched the warrior impassively, her fingers drumming against the pedestal in front of her. "Are you ready now?" she asked with a faint note of impatience in her voice.

"Yeah, let's do this," Ethan said, jumping slightly on his toes in an attempt to pump himself up and calm his nerves.

"Great. Move over to that platform, and we'll begin," Vivian instructed, gesturing to a square stone platform along the edge of the balcony. Intricate runes had been inscribed upon the surface, and they glowed green as Vivian tapped at her console.

Ethan walked over and stood on the platform, looking to the earth mage for further instructions. Without any ceremony, Vivian's hands danced through an intricate pattern atop the control panel, and the platform abruptly lurched before slowly starting its descent. At the same time, green lights illuminated the cavern below.

Riley heard Emma gasp beside her as the trial room came into view. The earth mages had turned the entire bottom portion of the cavern into a series of four sequential rooms that stretched nearly 100 yards. The rooms looked rather benign from Riley's perspective, but she did notice that they were themed. The first room looked like some sort of desert with sand lining the bottom of the chamber. A heavy iron door was placed on the wall leading to the next room.

"What is this?" Riley asked Vivian, who stood beside her. The woman's attention was focused solely on the glowing console before her.

“The trial. I believe I explained that already,” she replied. “I am able to control the rooms from here, and we’ve designed each enclosure to channel an individual element. As you might imagine, it was difficult to convince the other guilds to help build the structure.”

Riley didn’t have a chance to ask any further questions because the platform finally landed on the floor of the first room with a heavy bang. Ethan stumbled slightly but managed to remain standing. Vivian cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted down into the chamber. “I suggest you start moving!”

Then the mage’s hands flew over the control panel. Fiery geysers suddenly erupted from the floor of the first room, spewing the molten sand into the air. The material swiftly cooled, turning into muddy glass as it hit the ground.

Ethan’s eyes widened, and he sprinted forward. He managed to dodge two of the pillars of flame that exploded around him by lunging out of the way, yet he didn’t quite dodge the third. Molten glass coated the skin of his right arm, and Ethan let out a tortured scream, clawing at his arm to try to remove the substance.

Emma clutched at Lucas anxiously, and Riley glanced at her party menu in worry. She saw Ethan’s health dip, but then the bar immediately refilled. Not understanding what she was seeing, Riley looked back at the room. Ethan’s skin had regrown rapidly, and he stood in place, panting as he stared at his intact arm with an expression that warred between confusion and horror.

“I really do recommend you keep moving,” Vivian called out, her dispassionate voice echoing through the cavern. With a flash of her fingers, panels along the walls of the room slid open. Riley hadn’t noticed the enclosures before, the doors blending in seamlessly with the cave wall. Red imps darted forth, their beady little eyes immediately trained on Ethan. They summoned tiny balls of flame in front of them and then launched them toward the warrior.

A panicked look crossed Ethan’s face, and he raced forward, trying his best to dodge the geysers of flame and the missiles shot by the imps. Flames splashed against his skin, and his cries echoed through the stone cavern as he staggered forward. Somehow he persevered and made it to the heavy steel door on the other side of the room. His hand ripped open the metal panel, and he launched himself forward.

Ethan landed with a splash in the second room. Steam drifted into the air where his body sunk into the water. The second room was essentially an indoor lake. Ethan paused for a second, treading water and relishing the cool sensation of the liquid against his burnt skin before starting to swim toward the door on the other end of the room.

That delay cost him dearly.



“I told you to take this seriously,” Vivian called out.

The water began to tremor and shake, a current forming under the surface. Ethan struggled harder against the flow, his arms cutting the water as he kicked furiously to keep moving forward. Soon waves began to form and crash down on top of him, yet he was still pushing forward ever-so-slowly.

Vivian must have decided that this wasn't difficult enough because she then released creatures into the room. Riley noticed panels open in the walls, yet she couldn't see what had emerged. The only thing she noticed was the occasional flash of light in the water as the new creatures honed in on Ethan.

“Swim faster,” Lucas yelled, his eyes on whatever was approaching Ethan.

Soon the flashing creatures were upon the warrior. Ethan screamed and fell under the water for a moment as multiple sparks of light cascaded around him. He came up coughing and spewing water, his arms splashing at the water frantically as he tried to make it to the door.

“What are those things?” Riley asked, watching Ethan fall under the water again.

“Lightning eels,” Vivian said dismissively.

“This is sick,” Emma whispered, covering her mouth with her hand as she watched the scene play out in the room. “What's the point of this?”

Vivian turned to look at the girl with a thoughtful expression. She looked unaffected by the screams and strangled cries that came from Ethan below them. “I told you already. To obtain inner peace, we must foster mental discipline. Pain, passion, emotion – it's all merely a distraction. Once you train yourself to remove those impediments, you can attain true clarity.”

The earth magic master turned her gaze back to Ethan. “Your friend can't die in the trial. He can't be permanently harmed. You might have also noticed that his stamina is infinite. The only thing stopping him from completing the four rooms is himself. The trial is often used as a way to accelerate our training where meditation and study alone fail.”

Emma's mouth opened and shut several times as she tried to formulate a response. Riley and Lucas both turned their attention back to Ethan. He had barely managed to make it to the door to the third room. His hand clutched desperately at the metal handle, and he physically dragged himself into the next room, his legs paralyzed by the eels.

Ethan collapsed in the third room and lay twitching on the ground for a long moment. Vivian didn't relent, her hands once again

moving across the control panel. Condensation formed over the room and swiftly grew into a storm cloud. A swift wind began blowing from the direction of the third door.

“Get up, Ethan,” Lucas shouted, his hands cupped to his mouth. Riley was skeptical that his friend could hear him over the raging storm that was growing in the room.

The burly warrior pushed himself slowly to his feet, and the wind whipped at his clothing, pushing him backward. With tremendous effort, he managed to take slow, plodding steps toward the door. His body was tilted into the gale at an angle.

Then the storm shifted. Instead of rain, shards of ice began to drop into the room. With the strong current of air pushing against Ethan, the frozen debris was swiftly turned into jagged missiles. The ice sliced through Ethan’s skin and he grunted in pain as he struggled to keep moving. His skin and tattered clothing were swiftly stained red with blood as he fought to put one foot in front of the other.

“His persistence is remarkable for a novice,” Vivian quietly remarked as she watched Ethan’s progress. “Many don’t make it past the second room on their first try, much less manage to struggle through the third.” Her observation was met with silence from the other three. They watched the warrior trudge forward, his eyes squeezed shut and his arms covering his face.

Ethan’s hand finally grasped the handle of the third door. He held onto the metal like a lifeline as his body was continuously torn apart and re-healed. With a final surge of strength, he managed to heave the door open and push himself through the opening.

Finally, Ethan lay in the fourth and final room. This space looked similar to the rest of the earth guild. The floor was made of polished stone, and green globes of light flitted through the air. The warrior looked up in confusion, likely expecting to be attacked by the wisps. When no painful bolts of energy came, he sighed heavily and began to push himself to his feet.

Vivian shook her head as she watched Ethan, her hands continuing to tap the glowing symbols in front of her. “This is the real challenge,” she said softly. “The other rooms pale in comparison.”

Riley didn’t know how this room could possibly be worse than the last three. Ethan walked forward at a slow shambling pace, and it seemed like he wasn’t experiencing any difficulty. Yet, as she continued to watch, Ethan suddenly stumbled and dropped to one knee. It was as though an invisible hand began to press down on him forcefully. He struggled against the pressure, his chest heaving as he willed himself to move forward. He managed a few more feeble steps before he was again forced to his knees. He was only a few yards from the door.

“What’s happening?” Riley asked, already half expecting the answer.

“I’ve created a miniature gravity well above the fourth room. As your friend moves forward, the weight increases exponentially. The final few inches are the worst,” Vivian replied, her voice tinged with a clinical curiosity as she watched Ethan.

Emma couldn’t speak any longer. Her eyes had teared up watching her friend’s struggle, and she held her hands in front of her mouth. Even Lucas looked on with horror-filled eyes.

The warrior knelt in place, hovering on his hands and knees without moving for a long moment. Then he began to inch forward at a shuffle. They could see his body tremble under the strain as he crept toward the last door. When he was only two feet away, Ethan abruptly collapsed.

Riley held her breath thinking this was the end. Then she heard Ethan’s voice echo through the room. “Fuck you, Vivian,” he screamed from his prone position. “I’m going to complete this trial!”

Ethan began to edge forward at a crawl, forcing his arms and legs to move through pure force of will. Three inches... two inches... one inch. Blood began to pool under Ethan, parts of his body literally being crushed by the gravitational force in the room. With his last bit of strength, Ethan stretched out a hand toward the final door, his fingertips brushing the metal. Then he passed out.

# Chapter 15 - Tenacious

Vivian managed to transport Ethan's body back to the balcony with a few swift manipulations of the control panel. As she watched the earth mage work, Riley couldn't help but wonder how many people had been knocked unconscious during the trial before the mages decided to build a feature that allowed them to easily retrieve the participants' bodies.

Ethan was now laying on a stone table in the center of the room while Emma and Lucas hovered over him. The light mage looked at Riley and Vivian with an angry expression. "You should feel terrible," she said, stabbing her finger at Riley. "He suffered through this torture for the sake of your silly mission. I mean, look at him!"

Riley was looking. Ethan's body had been healed by whatever spells the trial used to sustain the challengers, and his skin was unblemished. However, his clothing bore evidence to what he had gone through and was now little more than shredded rags. Guilt washed over Riley. That had been a much more trying experience than she had anticipated, and she should have insisted on running the obstacle course herself.

A rumbling chuckle echoed through the room. "Don't be too hard on her, Emma. I volunteered after all," Ethan said as he opened his eyes and looked around the room with a slightly disoriented expression.

As he focused on their worried faces, Ethan's mouth curled in a grin. "You all don't look too happy. Didn't I win?"

"Not exactly," Vivian said, watching him clinically. She hesitated before adding in a grudging tone, "Yet you made it further than I expected. I wasn't entirely forthright before. Most of our novices rarely make it past the second room. Even our journeymen typically struggle with the third."

The group just stared at the mage for a long moment as she lapsed into silence. Finally, Lucas managed to form the question they were all thinking, "Does anyone pass the fourth room?"

Vivian glanced to the side to avoid their collective gaze. It was the closest expression the mage had made to embarrassment since Riley had met her. "There are a few Masters that have managed to make it through the last door."

"A few Masters..." Ethan sputtered and stared at her incredulously.

Vivian sighed. "You caught me in a rather unpleasant mood.

Even members of our guild are not entirely immune to emotion. I apologize.” She glanced at Riley. “Since Ethan made it as far as he did, I’ll grant your fire mage friend a meeting. Although, I make no promises to accept her into the guild.”

“All she needs is a meeting,” Riley said gratefully.

“Let’s get back to the part where I was almost crushed to death,” Ethan grumbled.

Vivian turned back to the warrior as he pushed himself upright on the table. A hint of a smile graced her typically emotionless lips. “You made admirable progress. If you hadn’t already chosen a class, I would offer you a place within the guild.”

She hesitated and peered at Ethan closely. “Perhaps I can offer you another reward. Your earth affinity rose considerably during the trial, and I may be able to teach you a simple spell.”

Ethan’s eyes widened, his anger immediately forgotten. “Yes. Yes, please. What did you have in mind?”

Vivian rubbed at her chin for a moment. “It needs to be a spell that doesn’t require an incantation since you don’t know Veridian. That limits the options considerably. Perhaps a defensive spell? There is a weaker version of *Stone Skin* that we sometimes teach the novices.”

The earth mage approached Ethan and rested a delicate hand on his temple. A trickle of green energy emanated from her fingers and slithered its way into the warrior’s skull. Ethan jerked slightly and his eyes clouded over. “Huh, that seems simple enough,” he murmured after a few moments.

Vivian turned back to the group. “If that’s all, I need to get back to maintaining the city’s gravity wells. I’ve wasted enough time as it is,” she said in a dispassionate voice. With that, the beautiful mage turned and strode from the room.

“What a strange woman,” Lucas said as he watched her leave.

“That’s one word for it,” Emma muttered.

Riley helped Ethan off the table, and he re-equipped his gear quickly. The color was starting to come back to his face, but Riley could still detect a change in his demeanor. He didn’t look like the same carefree guy that she had seen only an hour ago. His expression wasn’t haunted or angry. Quite the contrary. He now moved with a quiet confidence, and there was a thoughtfulness to his gaze that hadn’t been there before.

*Maybe he’s begun to realize just how far he can push himself*, Riley thought. She had assumed at first that the trial was merely pointless torture. Perhaps Vivian was right. There was something to be gained by putting yourself in an extreme situation and testing your limits. This wasn’t easy to do in the real world without serious repercussions.

Lucas groaned nearby. "Damn it's late. I need to log off guys."

Emma and Ethan both looked off into space for a moment, likely checking their in-game clock. Ethan sighed. "I guess I'll have to try out this spell later." He glanced at Riley. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Works for me," Riley said. "I'm anxious to find out what Flare has discovered in the fire mage guild."

Emma huffed softly. "Likely nothing. So far this has felt like a wild goose chase. Come on, Lucas," she said, gesturing at the mage. He rolled his eyes, but pulled up his system menu and tapped the log off button.

Riley shook her head slowly as she watched the twin flashes of multicolored light that appeared where Lucas and Emma had been standing only moments before. Ethan noticed her confused expression and grinned ruefully. "Don't mind Emma. She's always like that. *Especially* with other girls. She and Lucas have only been dating for a few weeks. She actually begged him to start playing this game, and he pulled me in with him.

"I try to tiptoe around her," Ethan added with a frown. "There's no sense antagonizing my friend's girl."

That made a lot more sense and explained why Emma seemed so nervous about her relationship with the skinny air mage. Maybe she thought Riley was somehow out to steal Lucas from her. That couldn't be further from the truth.

As though reading her mind, Ethan chuckled. "So, are you on the prowl? Going to snatch up her man?"

"Not hardly," Riley said with a smile of her own.

"Huh, what about that 'friend' you were all anxious about when we were on our way here?" Ethan asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Riley looked at him in shock and Ethan laughed again. "Just curious. I expect it would take a suitably badass person to keep up with you."

Her thoughts immediately turned to Jason. In the past, she hadn't really thought of him as anything but a friend. Sure, she had thought he was cute in a nerdy, shy sort of way. After spending so much time with him in-game, he had been entering her thoughts quite a lot lately. Riley shook her head. She wasn't in any hurry to start dating anyway. She wasn't quite certain she had gotten over what Alex had done to her.

"Like I said, he's just a friend," Riley said finally, realizing she hadn't answered Ethan's question.

The warrior raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like there might be a story there, but I'm not going to pry." He yawned loudly. "Besides, it is late. I'll see you tomorrow."

Riley waved at him, and he disappeared in another

multicolored flash of light. She sat in silence for a moment, trying to collect her thoughts. She wished she could smooth things over with Emma, but she didn't really see a solution. She had always had an easier time getting along with guys. Maybe she should lie and say she had a boyfriend. That might make things easier.

With a sigh, Riley pulled up her system menu and tapped the log off button. She soon found herself back in the real world, her back pressed against the soft covers of her bed. She lifted herself to a sitting position and pulled the heavy plastic helmet from her head, her long blonde hair getting caught slightly against the foam padding. With a weary sigh, Riley lay back down, intending to relax for a moment before getting ready for bed.

Before she knew it, she was asleep.

The next day, Riley woke up late, got ready for school in a rush, and barely managed to make it to practice on time. Her shin was still giving her some trouble, and so the coach had her do upper-body weight training alone in the gym. She was more than happy with this arrangement since it allowed her to keep her head down and avoid drawing the attention of the other girls. She even discovered that she had gone up a full ten pounds on all of her sets. Maybe she had been hitting the practice field a lot harder than normal lately.

She managed to maintain her low profile until lunch. Riley was currently carrying a tray through the cafeteria. Long tables had been laid out in sequential rows through the large room, the area illuminated by harsh fluorescent lights embedded in the ceiling. Screens along the sides of the hall flickered faintly, the logo for the school scrolling across the displays.

She had just spotted an empty table when she heard a snide voice behind her. "Look girls. There's a lesson here. No one wants to have anything to do with a slut."

Riley turned before she could stop herself. She knew she shouldn't react, but she couldn't help it. Carrie sat with a group of people, her face set in her usual smirk. The other girls at the table snickered softly.

"What? Nothing to say for yourself?" Carrie asked, eyeing Riley contemptuously. A lanky boy sat next to her and Riley vaguely remembered that his name was Kevin. His expression was uncertain as he watched the girls heckling Riley, but he didn't move to interfere.

Riley silently fumed. She had plenty she wanted to say to Carrie, but she knew it wouldn't help. Making a scene in the cafeteria would just make things worse and lashing out at Carrie's accusation would make her look guilty. Still, she couldn't help but visualize what she would do to the little brown-haired bitch if she ran into her in-game. It would make what she had done to the fire mage Prefect look

gentle.

With few options, Riley turned away and started toward the empty table. Before she had made it a few steps, she heard Carrie call out angrily, "You think you can just walk away from me?" Riley turned again to see the girl rising from her seat.

"Come on, Carrie," Kevin said, putting his hand on her arm. "Let's leave her alone. She's just trying to eat lunch."

Carrie turned and glared at the boy beside her before she could control her expression. Then her eyes softened slightly. "Perhaps you're right, Kev. She's not worth it anyway." Carrie retook her seat and immediately acted as though the confrontation hadn't happened, chattering away with her friends.

Riley stood staring at the girl for a moment. Carrie had become the ringleader of her tormentors. In her opinion, there was always one girl that drew in others like flies to honey. Carrie was definitely a queen bee at Richmond, the daughter of a filthy-rich oil tycoon. Add in the fact that her father was rarely home and often handed her his credit cards, and this had allowed her to create a little band of worshippers among the other students.

Not wanting to draw attention to herself, Riley took a seat at an empty table and began picking at her food. Her eyes lingered on Carrie and the boy beside her. As she watched the couple, Carrie placed her hand on Kevin's and giggled at some joke he must have told. Riley had known Kevin since grade school, but they had never been more than acquaintances. He seemed like a nice enough guy. She idly wondered why he had decided to date Carrie.

As the lunch period drew to a close, Riley heard static crackle over the loud speakers. The screens around the room flickered, the logo screen replaced with white noise that slowly resolved into a picture. The other students looked around in confusion, eyeing the screens with curiosity.

"What's going on?" a girl near Riley asked her friends.

An image of a deserted locker room appeared on the screens – water hitting the shower floor was the only sound that could be heard. The video angle shifted as the person holding the camera walked forward toward the showers. Riley could feel an odd sense of dread curl and coil in her stomach as she noticed the telltale signs of the girl's locker room. As the camera edged around the rim of the shower, she squeezed her eyes shut.

Riley could hear laughter from the students around her, and the shuffle of movement as heads turned in her direction. She used every ounce of willpower she had to keep her face calm. She wouldn't show them how much this hurt.

*How could they do this?*



She opened her eyes and saw the vision of herself floating on every screen. The sound of the students around her felt muted and surreal. To make matters worse, a message had been scrawled along the bottom of the image. “Call me for a good time! – Riley.”

Riley stood slowly, keeping her eyes on the tray in her hand as she walked towards the exit of the cafeteria. She could see her hands tremble ever-so-slightly as she held the tray.

*I just need to keep walking*, she repeated to herself over and over.

“Well, that was an entertaining advertisement,” a familiar voice called from behind Riley. “There’s nothing like lunch and a show, is there?”

Riley didn’t respond. She wouldn’t give Carrie the satisfaction of seeing the tears budding at the corners of her eyes. She dumped the contents of the tray and walked out of the room, the sound of laughter trickling along behind her as the humiliation settled on her shoulders like a heavy weight. And there was nothing she could do about it. As far as she may have come, she still felt weak. She *was* still weak.

# Chapter 16 - Mercenary

When Riley logged back into AO later that day, she once again found herself in the earth guild. She was still standing on the balcony overlooking the large cavern where Ethan had undergone the challenge. Her thoughts were dark as she looked down into the row of rooms below her, anger boiling in her veins.

Not for the first time, that anger was directed at herself. How could she let those girls do that to her? Why didn't she do something to fight back? Even her parents had told her to stand up for herself.

She had no qualms with defending herself inside Awaken Online – but the real world felt different. How was she supposed to retaliate against Carrie and her awful group of friends? What could she do? Feeling helpless and trying to escape the painful emotions that swept through her brain, Riley summoned her dark mana and the chill energy swiftly clawed its way up her spine. The cool power immediately blunted the edge of her anxiety and anger.

As Riley considered this, she realized that maybe her dark mana explained the difference between her real-world and digital reactions. Inside the game, her mana washed away all of her fear and hesitation, allowing her to act on what she wanted. In the real world, those emotions were still there, preventing her from acting and allowing her to question herself and the consequences of her actions.

Riley sighed. Not that this revelation helped solve her problem. She shook her head, trying to focus on her quest. Maybe she could at least make herself forget the embarrassment for a few precious hours. She pulled up her friends list and saw that her teammates were already online. Riley sent them a message and said she was heading over to the fire guild shortly. Within a few minutes, the others replied and explained that they would meet her there.

Riley scanned the area around her, the polished walls of the cavern were illuminated by a faint green glow from the floating lamps. “Now I just need to figure out how to get out of here,” she muttered.

It turned out it only took her fifteen minutes to navigate the maze-like earth guild and find the exit. She only had to ask for directions three times. She was getting better. Another ten minutes passed, and she was standing outside the rough-hewn wooden gate of the fire guild. The weather had worsened in the game world, a thin sheet of rain falling continuously and pattering against the heavy leather of Riley's hood.

“About time you showed up,” Emma grouched when she saw Riley approach.

“Oh? Did I cost you a whole five minutes?” Riley snapped. Her hood fell back slightly as she leaned forward, and Emma flinched as she caught sight of her dark eyes.

Ethan looked at Riley in surprise. Then he interjected before Emma could start a fight, “They could afford to install some signs in the earth guild. It took me forever to find my way out of those caves. I kept getting turned around. The in-game map also has trouble showing the different levels of tunnels inside the mountain.”

“So, are we going to do this?” Emma asked tersely, glaring at Riley as she hugged Lucas’ arm. She shivered slightly as the rain cascaded off her white robe. Apparently, the fabric didn’t provide much resistance to the elements.

Riley knew she had a bunch of spare cloaks in her pack. Jason purchased them in bulk for his zombies, and she had ended up with a large number of extra garments. However, she made no move to offer one to the light mage. She wasn’t exactly in a charitable mood.

“I’m curious to find out what Flare has learned,” Lucas said, oblivious to the tension between the two girls. “You think the cultists could be hiding within the fire guild?”

“I have no idea, but let’s find out,” Riley replied.

Without any further ado, she approached the gate and rapped her knuckles against the wood. Once again she was greeted by the surly-voiced guard, and then Emma and Ethan paid the group’s toll. The gatekeeper told them that Flare was probably in her tent since the duels tended to peter out when the weather turned wet.

The group found Flare sitting outside of her tent in a loose set of garments. Her eyes stayed closed as she let the rain wash across her skin. She looked tranquil, her form loose and relaxed. Riley felt envious for a brief moment. She hadn’t found much peace lately. Then she did a double-take. Was she actually jealous of a computer program?

As she approached the fire mage, Riley cleared her throat, and Flare opened her eyes. “How’d it go?” Flare asked bluntly, inspecting the group closely.

“We spoke to Vivian, one of the earth guild Masters, and she has agreed to meet with you,” Riley replied. “She didn’t promise to let you into the guild, but you have the interview you wanted.”

A small smile curled Flare’s lips, lightening her usually aggressive demeanor. Then, in a flash, it was gone. “Thank you,” Flare said gruffly. “I’ve discovered some information as well.” Her eyes darted to a passing pair of mages. “We should move inside and out of the rain,” she suggested, motioning to the tent behind her.

The group obliged and moved into the tent, taking up seats on the floor. Riley hadn't missed Flare's furtive glance at the other fire mages. Was there something going on within the fire guild? Was Flare suspicious of the other mages?

"What did you find?" Ethan asked in his usual rumbling voice.

Flare grimaced. "If I had known what you were asking me to do, I would have requested more than an interview." Her eyes rose to meet Riley's. "Although, like I told you on the road leading to Vaerwald, some among the fire mages are still honorable." Her gaze dropped to the floor. "Just not very many..."

She paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts. "As you suspected, the fire mages have been purchasing undead for some time now. The slaves are stored in a warehouse near the back of the camp, and only a few of the higher-ranked mages are admitted to the building at a time."

"What are they doing with them?" Lucas asked.

Flare glanced at the air mage. "Fighting them," she replied simply.

"I'm not sure I understand..." Lucas began.

"Neither did I," Flare interrupted. "At least not at first. The undead have nearly endless stamina, and they heal relatively quickly using potions. They also don't feel pain as acutely. As a result, they can fight in numerous duels without getting tired or burning out."

Riley didn't immediately understand Flare's point. Why would the mages want to duel the undead? Then her eyes widened as the realization struck her. She had gained experience from fighting the Prefect. Riley also suspected that the fire mages leveled from their daily duels, which is why it was a staple activity within their guild and was an easy replacement for fighting monsters.

"They're using the undead to level more quickly," Riley said softly.

"Exactly," Flare said. "Many of the undead were former soldiers resurrected by the Regent of the Twilight Throne, so they make capable combatants. But only a select group of fire mages have been invited to participate. The leaders are using the undead to increase their own power and stay entrenched within the guild."

"That doesn't exactly seem fair," Emma groused.

"Or humane," Lucas added.

Riley shook her head. There wasn't much she could do for the undead other than tell Jason. It wasn't like she could afford to get into a fight with the fire guild in the middle of Vaerwald. She expected that the guild leadership would be a lot tougher than the Prefect she had fought. Riley needed to keep her eye on their objective – finding the cultists and stopping the plague. Unfortunately, Flare's explanation

didn't get her any closer to solving her quest or discovering the source of the strange magic disease.

Flare picked up on Riley's pensive expression. "You're wondering how this relates to the magical sickness, aren't you? I'm not sure if this helps, but it turns out that the fire guild has been selling a handful of the undead within the city."

"To whom?" Ethan asked.

"Apparently, there are other mages that are interested in experimenting on the undead. I couldn't find the names of the buyer, but I might know someone who could help you," Flare replied.

"It probably won't surprise you to discover that there is a rather large underground market for magical creatures and artifacts within the city," she continued. "There's one shop in particular that deals in such goods." She raised her hands to forestall their questions. "I'm not saying the owner is part of this black market, but he usually knows what's going on within Vaerwald."

"Who is the shop owner?" Riley asked.

"His name is Cecil Stone, and he owns a small enchanting shop on level eight. I suggest you go speak to him." Flare hesitated. "But be prepared to pay a hefty amount of coin for the information. Cecil isn't known for being free with his inventory or his info."

Emma snorted. "Of course he isn't. Why would any part of this quest be easy?"

Riley closed her eyes and suppressed the desire to hit the annoying light mage. After a brief pause, she turned back to Flare. "Thank you for your help. I expect Vivian will meet with you whenever you have a chance to stop by the earth guild."

Ethan chuckled. "If I were you, I'd try to get a read on her mood from the other earth mages before you have your meeting. She can be a bit temperamental for someone who prides herself on self-discipline." He looked at Flare, his expression sobering. "Also, if she asks you to participate in a trial, get your ass out of there fast."

"I'm sure I can handle it," Flare said in a cool tone.

The warrior snorted. "Yeah, that's what I thought too."

With that, the group bid Flare goodbye and made the slow trek back out of the fire guild. Once they were outside the wooden walls, they eyed one another uncertainly as the light rain pattered against their clothes and armor.

Lucas spoke up first, "So I'm not certain I understand the connection between the undead and the sickness. It seems thin."

Emma nodded. "That's a polite word for it. All we know is that the children were bringing books on dark magic to the fire guild. That doesn't mean either the books or the undead have anything to do with this magical plague. They could have picked up the disease from one

of the other mages they delivered books to.”

Riley sighed. As much as she hated to admit it, Emma was right. Other than Marie’s offhanded comment, the connection with dark magic wasn’t obvious. Her quest window also hadn’t updated after talking to Flare, so she couldn’t be certain that her next step was to visit this enchanter. Yet she couldn’t shake the feeling that dark magic was involved. It was also a pretty big coincidence that the fire guild was borrowing books on black magic and that they were purchasing the slaves at the same time a magical plague had appeared.

“What I don’t understand is how this mysterious buyer relates to the quest,” Ethan added, rubbing at the stubble on his chin. “Assuming the undead are connected to the sickness, don’t all signs point to the fire mages being guilty? If these cultists can shapeshift, then they could be hiding here. Should we even bother investigating this enchanter?”

Those were also good questions, and Riley didn’t have an immediate answer. “I don’t know,” she replied after a brief pause. “There’s a lot of missing information.”

She hesitated, trying to collect her thoughts. She needed to tackle this one step at a time. “Why don’t we start at the beginning? Is it possible the sickness was caused by someone experimenting with dark mana?”

All eyes turned to Emma and Lucas, as their resident magic experts. “I suppose it’s possible,” Lucas began. “I mean, I’ve seen a few dark mages use spells that are poison or disease based. I’m not exactly an expert regarding the game’s magic system, but maybe someone could create a plague.” The young man turned and looked to Emma for confirmation.

“It’s *possible*,” Emma added grudgingly.

“Okay,” Riley began, “so let’s assume for now that the disease has something to do with dark magic. If that’s the case, then the fire mages are our prime suspects. They were borrowing books on dark magic, and the children who first got sick all came here. The cultists may have infiltrated their ranks.”

“Assuming they’re involved at all,” Emma reminded her.

Riley bit her lip. The light mage wasn’t exactly wrong, but it felt like she was being deliberately difficult. “This whole quest revolves around the presence of the cultists,” Riley said finally. “That seems like compelling evidence so let’s just add that as another assumption – the cultists are somehow involved.”

Ethan rubbed at his neck. “Okay. If that’s the case, then I’m changing my mind. I’m not so sure that the fire guild is the place to look. You heard Flare. Only the higher-ranked members were using

the undead. How would the cultists have made it that far up the ranks?"

Lucas nodded along to his friend's explanation. "We also know that the fire guild mages are using the undead to level. It seems like they have a plausible reason to use the undead that doesn't seem to involve creating some sort of magical plague. Does that make sense?" he asked, looking at the group in uncertainty.

"Actually, it does." Riley began pacing back and forth, trying to piece together the facts they knew. "That weakens the evidence that the cultists are hiding in the fire guild. In other words, the fire guild mages have a clear motive for using the undead. On the other hand, this mysterious buyer's goal is unknown."

Emma grumbled, "I don't see what the enchanter has to do with anything. Aren't the fire mages the ones with the books? They're also psychopaths. In my opinion, it would be an easy place for these cultists to hide. If we're going to keep going on this silly quest, I say we start with the fire guild."

Riley stopped moving, eyeing each of the group members. "It seems like there is some evidence in both directions. So I guess we need to decide whether to look further into the fire guild mages or go speak to the enchanter."

A frown creased Ethan's lips. "Honestly, I'm leaning toward visiting this enchanter now."

"You all know my vote," Emma huffed.

The group turned to look at Lucas. "I'm not sure," he murmured. His gaze drifted to his hand where it was buried in the pocket of his robe. He pulled out the same silver coin, thumbing the hard metal surface. "If we're divided on how to continue, I say we let the coin decide again."

Ethan barked out a laugh. "I like this new devil-may-care side of you, Luke. I'm fine with letting the coin decide."

The light mage just shrugged, rubbing at her arms. "Fine. I don't care at this point as long as we get out of the rain."

"It's okay with me," Riley said. She was also leaning toward meeting with the enchanter now that they had talked it through. Her gut was telling her that the cultists weren't in the fire guild. They might have managed to infiltrate their ranks, but it was a stretch to assume they had taken over the guild leadership. Although, they *were* making a lot of assumptions. She hated to agree with Emma, but she could see the argument going the other way.

"Fine," Lucas said. "Heads we go investigate the fire guild further. Tails we go see the enchanter." The group nodded in agreement.

Without further ado, Lucas flipped the coin into the air. The

silver material glinted in the gloomy light. A few errant raindrops smacked against the metal surface, throwing the coin slightly off course and Lucas was forced to scramble to catch it. He just barely grabbed the coin before it struck the ground.

“Don’t leave us in suspense. Where are we heading next?” Ethan asked impatiently.

Lucas looked down at his hand and then back up at the group. “It looks like we’re meeting this enchanter.”



# Chapter 17 - Enchanting

The group stood outside a ramshackle building on the outskirts of level eight. This area saw little foot traffic and the streets were nearly deserted. Riley eyed the structure in front of her skeptically, her hand resting on the hilt of the dagger at her hip.

Presumably, this was the enchanter's shop, but it didn't look like much. Dim lights flickered behind the shuttered windows as raindrops struck the roof in a staccato rhythm and water streamed down the cracked tiles. Although the group had gone down several levels, the buildings around the edge of the city's rings weren't immune to the rainfall.

"What a dump," Emma said in a disgusted tone.

"No kidding," Lucas added. "I was expecting something more interesting."

Riley shrugged. In her experience, appearances could be deceiving. Just like this quest, few things in AO seemed to meet her expectations. "I just hope Cecil knows who purchased the undead. It will be a pain if this is a dead end."

Ethan nudged Lucas with his elbow. "Get it? Dead end? And we're tracking down a bunch of undead..."

Lucas rolled his eyes at his burly friend. "That was pretty bad."

Riley ignored their banter and approached the door, tugging open the wooden portal. The air inside the shop smelled vaguely musty, and the room was lit by flickering lamps that hung from the ceiling. She turned to look behind her where Lucas and Ethan were still bickering.

"You guys coming or what?" Riley asked.

With that, she entered the shop. Rows of shelves were crammed into the small space. Every flat surface was lined with oddball objects. As the group trickled through the cramped shop, Riley noted an entire shelf devoted to tea kettles. Another shelf held a host of small jars – little lizards beating at the glass in several of them.

"This is the weirdest shop," Ethan said, trying to edge his bulk through the rows of shelves without bumping into the merchandise.

"Look! There's a slingshot," Lucas exclaimed, grabbing at the object.

"Put it down, boy," a voice grumbled from deeper within the store. "I don't go into your house and touch your things. Besides, you're liable to put your damn eye out. Not that I'd mourn the loss of an idiot's eye, but you'd probably go whine to the guards."

Lucas glanced down at the slingshot skeptically. As though reading his mind, the voice continued, "Don't believe me? Just try firing it. The last customer that refused to listen to me is now blind as a bat. What do you think that peashooter fires? I'll give you one guess, and it isn't peas."

The air mage's eyes widened, and he slowly placed the slingshot back on the shelf. "What's even the point of a magical slingshot that fires eyeballs?" he muttered. The shopkeeper either didn't hear the question or didn't feel that it was worth answering since his questions were met with pointed silence.

As the group filtered through the store, they finally caught sight of a surly looking little man seated behind an enormous workbench near the center of the shop. He wore thick leather coveralls and wire glasses. A bronze telescoping eyepiece hovered over one of his eyes, which he was using it to inspect an intricate mechanical contraption in front of him. The man didn't bother looking up as they approached, his fingers running through his thick beard.

Riley assumed this must be Cecil. She stood near the back of the group and watched him closely. How had he known that Lucas had picked up the slingshot? The shelves obscured his line of sight to the rest of the shop. Perhaps there was a magical explanation. Either that or his *Perception* and *Listening* skills were incredibly advanced.

"Are you Cecil?" Riley questioned, moving to the front of the group and pushing back her hood and cloak to reveal her face.

As she neared the shopkeeper, the man's eyes jumped up with a startled expression. His gaze locked on the bow slung over Riley's shoulder. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked in a threatening voice, ignoring Riley's question. "Where did you get that bow, girl?"

Cecil's hand shifted under the table, and the sudden screech of metal filled the air. Riley could hear the thud of deadbolts locking into place near the front door. At the same time, several cleverly hidden mechanical arms unfurled from the ceiling. Tendril-like crystals were now pointed at the group, each prism glowing with multicolored energy. A faint humming could be heard as the glow around each of the arms increased in strength.

"I'll ask one more time," the man rumbled, removing his eyepiece and his attention focused solely on Riley. "Where did you get that bow? You have ten seconds, or I'll be selling your ashes to my next customer."

As Riley watched the shopkeeper, another piece of information clicked into place. Could this enchanter be the one who had taken in Lily as an apprentice? He had recognized the bow, and this seemed to fit with Marie's story. It was a strange coincidence that Riley had already met two people that were important to Lily.

"I found the bow," Riley answered slowly. "It was in a dungeon north of the Twilight Throne. I also spoke with Marie, and she can vouch for me."

At the mention of Marie's name, Cecil slowly sat back on his stool, and some of the tension left his face. However, he still scowled at Riley. "I'll have to check on your story, but the fact that you know Marie's name is telling." His hand moved under the table, and the threatening mechanical arms retracted back into the ceiling.

"Um, so what were those crystals?" Ethan asked, his eyes still on the ceiling.

"Kadabar stone," Cecil answered gruffly. "They can be imbued with mana and hold a charge. I've adapted these particular stones to condense mana into a stream that retains the volatile properties of the original energy." Cecil began, his voice taking on a lecturing tone.

"Laser turrets?" Ethan muttered. He glanced at Lucas and whispered, "We can build laser turrets in this game? Why did I roll a warrior?" Emma let out an exasperated sigh beside them.

Cecil shook his head slightly and his eyes refocused on Riley. "You still have some explaining to do. How did you find the bow and what are you doing here?"

Riley decided to be candid. "Lily died hunting the cultists who took her family. I found the bow and have picked up where she left off. My quest led me here." She hesitated, trying to decide how to explain the magical plague. "There is a magical sickness that is afflicting some of the children in the city. I believe it may be connected to the same cult."

Cecil's perpetual frown deepened. "I have heard the rumors of this plague, but I haven't had a chance to speak with Marie about it. Your story begins to hang together, but it still doesn't explain what you're doing in my shop."

"We are trying to determine the origin of the disease," Riley explained. "We believe that the first children to be afflicted were delivering books for the library."

"They just so happened to be delivering books on dark magic to the fire mages," Ethan added.

"Exactly," Riley said. "We think there is a connection between dark magic and the disease. We originally suspected that these cultists might have infiltrated the fire guild. But it turns out that the fire mages are purchasing undead slaves to use in their duels."

"And this affects me how?" Cecil asked impatiently, waving a hand at her to get on with it.

"We heard that the fire mages have sold some of the undead and that you keep track of the sale of magical ingredients and animals within the city. We were hoping that you might have some idea who

purchased the undead,” Riley replied.

“You *heard* that did you?” Cecil grunted. “Even if I did, why would I help you lot?”

Riley paused and watched the grumpy little man carefully. Despite his gruff demeanor, he had reacted quite violently to the sight of the bow. He had taken a big risk threatening a group of adventurers, even with his traps. That must mean that he had cared for Lily. Maybe she could use that.

“You should help us because we plan to avenge Lily and finish her quest,” Riley said evenly, her hand resting on the bow slung across her shoulder. “When I find the cultists responsible for this, I will be the last thing they see in this world.” She could feel her dark mana pulse in her veins, her hood drifting back and revealing her obsidian eyes.

Cecil watched her impassively, his wrinkled face unmoving. After a long moment, he grunted, “Fine. That damn girl was one of the least irritating people I’ve had to deal with in years. Perhaps I will do this one last thing for her.”

The little man shifted in his seat, his hand reaching under the table. Riley heard a click, and a series of whirring sounds came from farther within the shop. Suddenly, a book whipped through the shelves and whizzed directly toward Cecil’s head. Just before it struck him, the little man lifted a gnarled hand and grabbed the book out of the air, setting it on the table before him and flipping open the cover. Riley’s group looked at each other uncertainly, not quite sure whether to ask how Cecil had accomplished that last feat.

“Hmm, let’s see here,” Cecil muttered as he flipped through the pages. “It’s true that I keep track of most interesting sales within the city.” He lifted his eyes briefly to look at them. “You never know when that might be useful later.”

His hand moved back and forth across the book’s weathered pages until his finger came to an abrupt stop. His already puckered expression soured further. “That’s odd. It appears that the library actually purchased the undead you’re looking for.”

“Why would the library need undead?” Lucas asked. Riley just shook her head as the image of the scarred pillar from the front of the building flashed before her mind’s eye. It did seem strange since the dark guild had been banished from the city.

Cecil drummed his fingers on the book as a thoughtful expression flitted across his face. “Those emotionless busybodies occasionally purchase ingredients and other items for research purposes. The main library building has rooms for experimentation that they rent out to the higher-ranked mages.”

“So you’re suggesting that they bought the undead as test

subjects?" Lucas asked. He glanced at Riley. "I'm not certain what this means for our investigation."

"He's right," Emma chimed in. "This is getting a bit absurd."

Riley shrugged. "Or maybe we're looking for someone who had access to those undead and used the research areas Cecil mentioned. Maybe we just need to visit Clarence again to see if they keep logs of who had access to the undead."

Cecil snorted in amusement. "Good luck. Those rooms are reserved for ranking guild members. I doubt the librarians would share their records. Trust me; I've tried to use the laboratories before."

"This is pointless!" Emma exclaimed. "This is just more evidence that the fire guild is the place we need to be looking. We know the ranking members were using the undead to level. They would have had access to the labs, and they were also the ones requesting the books."

Lucas shook his head. "But they still have a clear motive for holding the undead. They could have also requested the books to research the undead they are using in their duels. On top of that, it feels lazy. If the cultists had infiltrated the guild, why would they have sold the undead? It seems like they would have wanted to hide what they were doing – especially with the negative reputation dark magic has within the city."

The group glanced at the air mage in shock. "Hey, I'm a computer science major," Lucas said. "I can handle a complicated logic puzzle..."

"I thought that was just an excuse to play video games all day," Ethan added with a laugh. "You know – *research*," he added, making air quotes with his fingers.

Riley drummed her fingers against her lips. Lucas made some good points. The fact that Cecil also knew Lily made her suspect that they were on the right track. It felt like everything circled back to the girl. She couldn't shake the feeling that the labs were the key.

"I think you're right, Lucas. I wish we could see the logs for those research rooms," Riley murmured, half speaking to herself.

Cecil eyed her appraisingly. "I suspect there's a way you could accomplish that goal. Assuming you are willing to get your hands dirty. Perhaps you should speak with Marie. There are quite a few people in Vaerwald that make a living by more ignoble means."

Riley turned her attention back to the little man, her eyebrows rising in surprise. "We will keep that in mind. Thank you, Cecil." With that, the group left the small store and gathered outside as the rain splattered their cloaks.

"So what's the verdict?" Ethan asked. "Our resident gambler here made some good points. I'm also curious to see what this 'Marie'

has to say.”

“Lucas?” Ethan nudged his thin friend with his elbow.

“I’m not sure...” the mage began. “I still don’t think it’s the fire guild. It just doesn’t make any sense. If it is this mysterious third party, then the only place we will find answers is inside the library.”

“I still think it’s the fire guild. Not that you will likely listen to me,” Emma said in a sullen tone. Riley noticed she was no longer hanging on Lucas’ arm. Perhaps she was upset he had disagreed with her.

The three then turned to look at Riley. She tended to agree with Lucas. The fire guild still didn’t have a clear motive for creating the plague unless the cultists were somehow hiding in their midst. It was possible but didn’t seem particularly likely. However, the alternative sounded like it would involve doing something illegal – including breaking into the lab and stealing the log books. That wasn’t a great tradeoff.

“I think we should investigate the library,” Riley said finally. As soon as she made the decision, a blue prompt appeared in the air before her.

### Quest Update: Violent Vindication

After investigating the fire guild, you discovered that the fire mages were purchasing undead slaves to improve their combat prowess and had sold some of the undead to a third party. This trail led you to Cecil, who indicated that the purchaser was none other than the Great Library itself. Confronted with a choice regarding how to proceed, you have decided to explore the library further. Hopefully, you have made the right decision.

**Difficulty:** A

**Success:** Kill the cultists responsible for the death of Lily’s family.

**Failure:** Unknown

**Reward:** Unlock Vendetta’s special ability. Other rewards unknown.

*That isn’t particularly helpful,* Riley thought sourly. She was beginning to miss games where the quests were spoon fed to her one task at a time. They had been much less confusing. Waving the prompt away, Riley eyed her teammates. “Well, I guess it’s time to go visit Marie.”

# Chapter 18 - Deceptive

The group walked through a series of alleys and side streets. While Cecil's shop might have been a dump, the buildings on the first level of the city were little more than dilapidated hulks. The ruined wooden structures towered over the group on either side of the street and filth covered the alleys. The only solace was that it was difficult for the rain to penetrate to this bottom level – leaving it relatively dry.

“Are we seriously going to try to break into the library? You know that was what that grumpy little man was implying,” Emma griped. “That seems insane, even for Riley. What happens if we're caught? Will the guilds kick us out of the city?”

Shrugging off the girl's verbal barbs, Riley kept walking forward. Her eyes searched the street ahead and the neighboring buildings systematically. Her time with Jason had taught her to be cautious.

“What other choice do we have?” Ethan grunted. “You heard the shopkeeper. We aren't getting into those laboratories legitimately. Besides, I don't mind if we do get kicked out. This is a game after all.”

“There is a risk,” Lucas conceded. “I don't exactly want to get exiled from the city, but it might also be the only place we're going to find more clues that will help us figure out how the plague was created. Aren't you curious to find out what's going on?”

The girl grimaced at Lucas' argument, her eyes drilling holes into Riley's back. At that moment, Riley stopped, raising her hand to halt the group. She had caught sight of a blue glimmer from the alley ahead of them. There were fresh footprints in the muck that lined the street, but she couldn't recall seeing any townsfolk for some time. A glance to the group's rear revealed that a similar alley was located behind them.

“What is it?” Lucas asked tentatively, raising his staff in front of him.

“I'm not certain,” Riley said in a low voice. “It's too quiet, and this would be a good place for an ambush.” She felt a strange sense of déjà vu, recalling a similar situation she had encountered with Jason. Except this time, she was traveling with a group of relatively novice players.

Ethan gently pulled his two-handed sword from his back and looked at Riley with an inquisitive expression. Picking up on his unasked question, she answered quietly, “You protect the rear. I'll try to slow down anyone that attacks from the front.” With a quick nod,

Ethan moved to the back of the group and faced the way they had come.

Glancing at Lucas, Riley added, "We just need crowd control. I don't know what spells you have, but try to slow them down or disable them." As she turned to Emma, the light mage merely sniffed and looked away.

*I hope you don't get us all killed*, Riley thought in irritation. Her frustration with Emma was blunted as she felt dark mana race through her veins. She could feel an excited tingle in her finger tips as she pulled her bow from her back and nocked an arrow.

"We know you're there," Riley called out. "Show yourselves."

A long moment passed with no response as the group held themselves at the ready. Emma eventually turned to address Riley, most likely intending to make some other barbed comment. It never came. Instead, a figure stepped into the street. He was robed in leather armor dyed a dark gray, and his face was obscured by a wrap. Riley's *Perception* skill picked out several concealed blades even at this distance and a rapier dangled from his waist.

"What do you want?" Riley asked, her grip tightening on her bow. The crystals at the hilt glowed a faint red, throbbing in time with her heartbeat.

The man laughed. "What do you think, *Riley*? We're here for the bounty. You want to do this the hard way or the easy way?" A quick inspection confirmed that this was a player and he was a member of <Cataphract>. He was also over level 100. She had never heard of the guild, but, if he was an enemy, she supposed it didn't matter.

*How did they find me?*

Riley's lips pinched into a grim line as the icy claws of her mana dug into her brain. Without answering the player, she raised her bow and released in one fluid movement. Almost before the arrow left the string, she had another in its place. She heard the wooden shaft of her first arrow clatter against the cobblestones of the street as she sighted along her next missile. The player had dodged nimbly to the left and was now sprinting down the alley toward her.

"The hard way then!" he shouted.

Enemy players poured into the street from the alleys on either side of the group. Lucas sprang into action, lightning crackling along the length of his staff and then erupting from his hand in a bolt of energy as a thunderous crash echoed through the alley. Riley followed up on his attack with a rapid-fire series of bolts.

The lightning splashed against a wall of ice that had materialized in the street ahead of the leading player. The tendrils of electricity lanced harmlessly into the buildings on either side of the



street, charring the wooden paneling. Just as quickly as the ice had appeared, it vanished in a cloud of vapor, and the enemy players barreled through the mist.

Riley's eyes widened in surprise. These players were much more coordinated than she was accustomed to. The only saving grace was that the mage had overlooked her arrows, the bolts striking the unsuspecting lead player and slicing through his thigh and abdomen.

A golden glow suddenly enveloped the group as Emma began casting her new buff. Riley could feel herself move slightly faster and she found it was easier to draw her bow. However, it was difficult to tell the effects of the spell while getting attacked by the waves of players and with her notifications disabled. Riley heard a roar behind her and turned slightly.

Ethan had cast his new *Stone Skin* ability, his flesh rippling and turning a solid gray. His mass also increased substantially, and he lumbered forward with heavy steps that cracked the stones embedded in the street. He swung his two-handed sword in an overhead blow. The player in front of him barely parried the attack, stumbling to his knees. Ethan didn't relent and swept forward again, taking advantage of his momentum to neatly decapitate the player before he could recover.

Riley didn't have time to watch Ethan. The players before her were swiftly closing in and they outnumbered her five to one. She launched another few arrows and then switched to her daggers, the steel scraping against the leather sheaths as they materialized in her hands.

"Come on," Riley muttered, her eyes glowing darkly.

A red glow began to emanate from her blades, mixing with the tendrils of dark energy curling around the metal. As Riley watched, electricity also began to coil up her daggers. Surprised, Riley glanced to the side to find Lucas channeling a spell. Globes of crackling energy drifted from his staff to hover over the group.

*Some kind of electrical damage buff?* Riley wondered. An excited grin drifted across her lips. The odds were against them, but they wouldn't go down without a fight. She also relished the opportunity to burn off some steam.

Riley rushed forward toward her dark-robed attackers. At the last moment, she dropped to her knees and slid the last few feet toward the players. Not suspecting the sudden movement, Riley glided below their guard, and her daggers ripped through their leather leggings. Rich, crimson blood spilled on the street as the players dropped to their knees. She slammed a blade into the back of one of the prone men, leaving it to rest there.

A blood-red mist began to spew from the wound in the player's

back and encircle the group. Riley kept moving. She leapt to her feet and raised her blade to parry another attacker. His longsword scraped against her dagger and slid into the ground, throwing off sparks where it hit the cobblestones.

Riley darted forward again, and her free fist slammed into the man's face as her other dagger stabbed him in the chest in a flurry of blows, lightning lancing across his torso and briefly stunning him as his body slid to the ground.

Pain suddenly bloomed in Riley's shoulder, and she was jerked back by the force of an unseen blow. She staggered and glanced to the side to see a spike of ice embedded in her shoulder. It must have been the same water mage hidden farther down the street. Grimacing at the dull pain, she turned and was immediately swept off her feet. One of the prone players had managed to regain his footing and had rushed her.

She landed hard on her back, dropping her dagger. The player immediately landed on top of her, his blade racing toward her face. Riley grabbed his hand and stopped the blade within inches of her nose. Without a weapon, she couldn't fight back. Then she saw the fragment of ice still buried in her shoulder.

She clutched at the shard of ice with her free hand, ripping it free with a grunt of pain. Blood welled around the wound and dripped onto the street. Riley stabbed forward, impaling the player's eye with the jagged fragment. He howled in pain before rolling off her, his blood staining her armor red. Riley pushed herself to her feet and quickly reclaimed her dagger before rushing at the wounded man. She ran the sharp edge of the blade across his throat, and blood promptly jetted from the wound and splattered against the street before he fell limp.

In the short time that she had been fighting the players, her teammates had not fared well. Lucas' body was riddled with arrows, and he leaned against one wall as he repeatedly fired off blasts of lightning. Emma hid behind him, frantically trying to heal him. One of Ethan's arms had been severed at the elbow, the limb now ending in a crumbling lump of stone as he swung his two-handed sword wildly with one hand. Meanwhile, Riley herself was injured and breathing heavily, the blood mist struggling to heal the wound in her shoulder.

A laugh came from down the street. "This is it? This is a founding member of <Original Sin>? I was expecting more." The same dark figure that had spoken earlier walked forward casually as flashes of light illuminated his body. Somewhere nearby a light mage was casting the healing spells repeatedly, bringing him back to full strength.

Riley bit her tongue. If she were going to die here, she wouldn't

show any weakness.

“You weren’t supposed to hurt him!” Emma cried from nearby. She clutched at Lucas, who had collapsed into her arms as his health redlined. She cast her healing spells in quick succession in a desperate attempt to keep him alive.

The player chuckled again. “This is a game girl. He won’t die for real. What difference does it make? But we do appreciate you tipping us off to Riley’s location.”

Riley turned to glare at Emma, her dark mana flaring. Of course, the girl had betrayed her. She shouldn’t have ignored the hateful glances and irritating accusations. She had been far too trusting.

“Let’s just end this,” Riley said darkly, turning back to the player. Her hand clenched around her blade as she prepared for the final attack. The player’s teammates were regrouping around him, and nearly half a dozen players squared off against her.

The man chuckled, his face concealed behind his wrap. “I plan to.” He drew his thin rapier slowly and held himself at the ready.

Just as Riley was about to lunge forward, a dagger erupted from the player’s throat, spraying blood through the air. The man slumped forward and let out a choked gurgle as he died. As Riley watched in stunned amazement, the remaining players were cut down by a group of cloaked individuals that emerged simultaneously from *Sneak*. This group was equally high level, but no guild tag appeared when Riley inspected them.

*Are these other players?*

“That was certainly interesting,” a feminine voice said from farther down the alley. “I didn’t know what to expect when I heard someone had taken up Lily’s quest.”

The woman soon walked into view. Her hair was a brilliant red and tied in a tight ponytail that cascaded down her back. She was robed in dark leather, daggers and throwing knives riddling her person. Riley suspected there were more blades hidden out of sight.

“Who are you?” Riley asked.

“The name is Melissa. Before you ask, Cecil and I have what you would call a ‘working’ relationship. He sent word that you were planning to meet with Marie shortly after you left his shop. We were planning to meet you at the orphanage.”

A scream sounded from a nearby building, and, a moment later, one of Melissa’s rogues dumped the body of a light mage on the street. The man’s formerly pristine white robe was stained a rich crimson red. The red-haired rogue glanced down at the corpse of the fallen player, a sly smile creeping across her lips. “However, we weren’t expecting to have so much fun.”

The woman's eyes flashed with mischief. She circled Riley, inspecting her carefully. "I have no idea who you are or what you're planning to do, but I expect it's going to be interesting. It has been rather dull around here lately."

# Chapter 19 - Devised

Riley slammed Emma's back against the wall of a nearby building, causing the crumbling boards to crack under her weight. Her hand clenched around the light mage's neck as the girl's eyes widened in panic. Dark mana pulsed through Riley's veins while she watched Emma struggle in her grasp, the creeping chill seeming to feed her anger. An image of Carrie's smirking face flashed through her mind.

"You idiot. You sold us out to bounty hunters?" Riley hissed.

She glanced at Lucas who was lying on the ground nearby. He was slowly recovering from his wounds, blood staining his torn robes. Meanwhile, Ethan had slumped against a nearby wall, his skin returning to a normal hue and his hand slowly regrowing as he sipped at a healing potion. The bodies of the other players riddled the street, their blood running in small rivulets down the gutters of the low streets.

"You see this? What the hell did you think would happen?" Before she could stop herself, Riley pulled her dagger and pressed the blade to the girl's ribs. A faint whimper escaped the light mage's lips. "I should just kill you right now and be done with you." Melissa and her rogues watched with impassive expressions.

"Riley, please let her go," Lucas croaked from the ground, resting a feeble hand on her foot. "She just made a mistake."

"I understand how you feel, but you need to calm down," Ethan said in a subdued voice as he watched the scene. "You need to release your mana..."

Fuck Emma. She should just run the bitch through. The icy sensation in Riley's brain was running rampant, urging her to act on her desires. Then she hesitated. Those thoughts didn't sound like her. She shook her head to try to clear it. With an enormous effort of will, she withdrew her blade even as she slowly released her dark mana. Emma looked at her with fear in her eyes, her body still pressed against the building.

"I... I'm sorry," the girl sobbed, tears forming in her eyes. "I'm so sorry."

The two young men and Riley ignored Emma as she slumped to the ground, murmuring to herself. Without her mana, a sense of fatigue washed over Riley. With it came the memories of the recent battle and the painful events at Richmond. She hadn't realized how long she had been channeling her mana – escaping into its cool embrace to suppress away her unwanted emotions.

Riley slowly reclaimed her other dagger and her bow from the street as the others recovered from their wounds. She used this time to clear her head a bit. Once her teammates were all back on their feet, Melissa addressed Riley, “Well, that was all very dramatic. Are we ready to go now?”

The group answered with subdued nods.

“Fantastic!” the woman clapped her hands together, the sound ringing through the heavy silence that hung over the ally. “If you all will follow me...” The red-haired woman promptly threw up her hood and walked out of the alley, her rogues following closely behind her.

As the group walked down the decrepit streets on their way to the orphanage, Riley glanced at Ethan. The warrior’s face was set in a grimace, and he wouldn’t look at the light mage. Even Lucas looked angry. This might just be a game, but Emma’s betrayal still stung. She was certain that the arrows embedded in Lucas’ stomach and the loss of Ethan’s hand must have felt and looked pretty damn real.

As they reached the orphanage, and the rogues stepped inside, Emma said softly, “You all don’t have any reason to forgive me.” She glanced at Lucas and continued, “I didn’t think about what this would mean. Or what it would look like to watch you bleed out in my arms...”

“That’s right; you didn’t think,” Ethan growled. Then he hesitated, observing the girl’s red-ringed eyes. “This might be a game, but it’s not like anything we’ve played before. Vivian’s *challenge* made that clear to me. You need to stop acting like there are no consequences. You put everyone at risk – including Lucas and me.” With that, the warrior marched inside the orphanage.

Emma’s gaze turned to Lucas, her eyes pleading. The young man shook his head slowly. “Do you want to continue with us?” he asked quietly.

The light mage nodded slowly. “I do. I just... I was jealous of the attention Riley was getting. I know it sounds stupid now.” Tears bloomed in the girl’s eyes again.

Lucas didn’t look entirely sympathetic. “I like you, Emma. That should be enough – that should have *been enough*.”

The young man hesitated, his hand fingering something in the pocket of his robe. “If you really want to stay with us, then we will let the coin decide. Call it.” Without any fanfare, the silver coin appeared in his hand and then immediately launched into the air. It flipped end over end, briefly reflecting the light of the nearby street lamps.

Emma’s eyes widened in shock as the coin tumbled through the air. “Heads,” she croaked out just as the coin landed back in Lucas’ hand. This time, Riley didn’t see the mage’s free hand move under his robe – his gaze resting calmly on the coin. Emma watched his closed

fist as though it were her last lifeline, her hands clenching around her staff.

Lucas slowly unfurled his fingers, revealing the coin. Emma sobbed slightly in relief and leaned against the side of the run down building as Lucas pocketed the coin and stepped inside. Riley moved to walk past the girl.

"I-I'm..." she began.

"Stop," Riley replied. "If it were my choice, I'd have killed you in the alley." She hesitated for a moment, her eyes clouding. "I put up with enough in the real world. Here – in this place – I don't have to swallow any bullshit. We need a healer, and I will let your friends decide. But if you betray me again, I *will* kill you." Emma nodded numbly, dropping her eyes to the ground and suppressing a quiet sob.

Then Riley stepped inside the orphanage, her thoughts troubled. Despite the anger that still bubbled in her chest, she was shocked by the transformation she had seen in the other three. When she had first met them, they were carefree and bantered constantly. Now each one of them seemed older somehow. And it wasn't just Emma's betrayal. She had noticed this change even before the light mage had rattled them out. She couldn't help but wonder if she had caused that or if it was somehow the game itself.

As Riley stepped through the labyrinth-like hallways of the orphanage, children peered around the door frames and holes in the wall, likely curious to see Marie's new visitors. She saw Rose's face peeking around a door frame, the girl waving at her. Riley bit down on her anger and ruffled the girl's hair as she passed. She had more important things than Emma's betrayal to deal with right now.

Riley found the rest of the group in Marie's kitchen sitting around the same worn table. Marie pulled a kettle from the stove and poured a mug of tea, handing it to Lucas. Meanwhile, Emma slunk in behind Riley, standing meekly in the back of the room.

"What's all this commotion?" Marie asked as she caught sight of Riley. She gestured at Melissa, eyeing her sourly. "You brought this group of ne'er do wells into my orphanage, so the reason better be good."

The red-haired woman grinned in response. "Oh, Marie. I've truly missed your judgmental comments."

The older woman snorted, eyeing the rogues silently lounging around her kitchen, their faces shrouded by their hoods. "Really? I would have imagined you get plenty of entertainment from your friends. They have such sparkling personalities after all," she added in a dry tone.

"We're here because I think we have a lead on the source of the plague that's afflicting the children of the low streets," Riley

interjected, forestalling yet another fight.

“Thank heavens,” Marie replied. “Over the last couple days, the sickness has spread further. There have been multiple accounts amongst our neighbors, and more cases are springing up on the higher levels.”

“Actually, there have been a total of two hundred and seventeen new cases reported within the last twenty-four hours,” a rough voice said from the doorway.

Cecil entered the kitchen, his boots causing the floorboards to creak with each step. “At least twelve of those reports include an adult victim, which means the plague isn’t limited to children. They may just be more susceptible. The infection rate is escalating quickly. Even the City Council is beginning to take notice.”

He coughed harshly and took a seat at the table. “To make matters worse, the vultures have begun to realize the value of the tears. Liquid mana fetches a premium in a city like this. The tears are especially potent – nearly equivalent drop-for-drop to the purified mana stored in the guild wells. I expect that riots may break out soon at the rate we’re going.”

“I’ve always enjoyed your rampant optimism, Cecil,” Melissa said with a chuckle. “Although, I guess there will always be those that profit from the misery of others. Not that I can blame them, of course. Unfortunately, I have been hired by a rather *influential* client to figure out a solution to this predicament, or I might be inclined to take advantage myself.”

Riley’s brow furrowed in thought as the group kept talking. Melissa’s comment made her recall the conversation with Vivian in the earth guild and the guild well filled with emerald liquid. The Master had been concerned about collecting sufficient mana to maintain the city’s energy supply. Maybe they had been looking at this the wrong way. What was the cultists’ motivation for creating a magical disease?

What if they weren’t just trying to destroy a city but were instead intending to gather more mana? In the dungeon, they had been trying to create some sort of demi-god. Forming that creature would have required a massive amount of energy – perhaps on par with the magic that kept Vaerwald running. Except that, unlike the city, a band of psychopathic cultists probably didn’t have thousands of people paying daily mana tolls.

“I believe a band of cultists may be responsible for this plague,” Riley said, interrupting the group’s banter. “I encountered this group in the north. They were trying to create a new *god* – as crazy as that sounds. What if they have manufactured this plague to harvest mana?”



All eyes in the room were now focused on Riley. "That would assume that these cultists are actually involved," Cecil said, grunting as he took a seat at the table. "What if this is nothing more than a naturally-occurring illness?"

Riley nodded. "It's possible, but I don't think so. Why did it suddenly emerge right now – at the same time that the Twilight Throne came into existence and guilds began purchasing undead slaves? The fact that the first group of children to contract the disease were all running books and scrolls for the library is also suspicious. Also, I wouldn't be here if a friend hadn't tipped me off to the possible connection between the plague and the cultists."

"Really, what kind of 'friend' would know of this illness before the city officials?" Cecil demanded irritably.

"His name is Jerry," Riley replied. He is a member of the Shadow Council of the Twilight Throne."

"Jerry," Melissa hissed. Before Riley could react, the woman had made it across the room, and a dagger was leveled at her throat. "Big floppy hat? Stupid mustache? That Jerry?"

"That sounds like him," Riley replied coolly, matching the woman's stare. "Like I said, he mentioned the plague in passing."

"Back off, Melissa," Marie said. "The girl isn't involved in your little spat."

The rogue woman moved away slowly, still glaring. Riley rubbed at her throat as the blade withdrew. "What's the deal between you and Jerry?" she asked.

Before Melissa could launch into a tirade, Marie interjected. "Jerry used to be the leader of a band of rogues here in the low streets. In fact, he led the top group for years. He also disappeared a few years ago – shortly after Lily vanished in fact." Marie's face clouded, her gaze resting on the mug cradled between her hands.

"He left with no warning, and our damn company fell to shambles!" Melissa barked. She whirled on Riley. "Do you know what happens when you leave a band of outlaws without a leader? No? They immediately go wild." Her gaze moved to the rogues around the room, more than one flinching away from her. "It took me years to rebuild what we had and whip these cowards into line. Years!"

Melissa glanced at Riley. "You can tell that floppy-hatted bastard that we have some unsettled business."

"Noted," Riley said with a frown. "But let's get back to the immediate problem. I believe there is some compelling evidence that this disease was manufactured. If that's the case, the question is who created it? If it's the same group of cultists, they might be hiding inside one of the guilds or in plain sight. The ones we encountered before were capable of shapeshifting."

Cecil groaned softly. "Great. This better explains your group's bickering in my shop. If that's the case, then where do you think these cultists are hiding?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Riley replied, putting up a hand to forestall Cecil's next question. "However, I suspect that it is one of the guilds. The fire guild looks like a prime suspect at the moment."

She glanced at her group. "I think there will be a lead in the library. Cecil's records indicated that the librarians were purchasing the undead to make them available in their labs. If we can find out who has used those labs, we might discover where the cultists are hiding."

"Wait. So, you're proposing to break into the Great Library," Melissa said, a grin creeping across her face. "Forget what I said before. This sounds entertaining. I've been meaning to stick it to those uptight mages for a while."

Cecil ignored the rogue. "I think I follow your reasoning. Only the guilds have access to those labs, and these cultists might have used their status within the guilds to access to the library and manufacture this plague."

"Exactly," Riley replied with a curt nod.

He hesitated, running his hand through his beard. "But getting inside the library is no small feat. The security is extraordinary. I assume you will not be entering during the day since it is actively staffed and guarded. As much as some would likely prefer to cut their way in, a little stealth would be wiser," he added, glancing meaningfully at Melissa.

"Then how do you suggest we get inside?" Lucas asked, finally speaking up. He and Ethan had stayed quiet during most of the encounter, watching the other people in the room carefully.

Cecil glanced at the air mage. "We would need to slip inside at night, of course," he answered matter-of-factly.

"We?" Melissa asked in confusion. "Since when does the bad-tempered enchanter get off his work bench? Have you finally removed that wand from your ass?"

"Since his student was killed by a band of crazy cultists and his city was being overtaken by a magical plague. And I keep that wand there in case of emergencies thank you very much," Cecil retorted with an irritated scowl.

"I will be coming too," Marie said, rising from the table. She glanced at Melissa with a small smile. "Consider this me formally coming out of retirement."

The red-haired woman's excited grin widened even further, her eyes scanning the group around the kitchen. They each wore serious expressions, many fingering their weapons. "Oh, this is going to be a

blast,” she murmured.

## Chapter 20 - Strategic

Cecil laid out a parchment on the kitchen table. The paper was yellowed with age and tears marred its edges. An elaborate series of images had been drawn on the parchment, small handwritten notes dotting the margins. The drawings looked remarkably similar to a modern floor plan. Riley could make out distinct rooms, and several pictures were shown in succession, possibly indicating multiple levels.

"This is one of the few existing maps of the Great Library," Cecil explained, his calloused fingers tracing the outline of the massive structure. "I anticipated that you all might be planning something crazy, so I came prepared. As you can see, the library is actually composed of several floors. The lower levels were carved into the disc, serving as both storage areas and as dormitories for the librarians."

His fingers moved to the second set of drawings. "The ground floor is where the stacks are located. The librarians refer to it as the 'Great Hall.' This is the section that general visitors see. In contrast, the upper levels are reserved for private studies and the laboratories. As you might imagine, these areas are off limits to most guests."

"How do you know all of this?" Lucas asked, shaking his head as he looked at the detailed drawings. "And how do you have a copy of this map?"

The wrinkles around Cecil's eyes scrunched as he squinted at the young air mage. "Because I helped build the library."

Everyone in the room glanced at him in surprise. "You what?" Melissa asked. "Just how old are you?"

"That's none of your damn business," Cecil snapped. "Do you all want to gossip, or do you want me to explain the layout and defenses of the library?"

"By all means, go right ahead," the rogue said as she gestured at the map. "You ancient grump," she muttered under her breath.

Cecil ignored Melissa and launched back into his explanation. "The exterior of the library is heavily warded. I expect that it would take most of the fire guild working together to breach the shielding around the building – not that they would actually work together, of course. At night, these wards extend to the main entrance and the various service entrances along the side of the building.

"Assuming we can get inside, there are a number of safeguards in place to protect the books and scrolls that are kept there. It will only take a single librarian to sound an alarm, and I can tell you that the place is filled to the brim with the brown-robed men and women. Our

best bet here is stealth rather than a direct confrontation.”

“Are the librarians a threat?” Ethan asked, his brow furrowed.

“Not exactly,” Cecil explained. “The librarians are chosen for their complete lack of magic. The idea, such as it is, was that they would be less tempted to take advantage of their position and knowledge of the library if they couldn’t use magic.”

“But what he hasn’t mentioned is that they are all trained in martial weaponry skills,” Marie added. “They maintain their own training hall inside the library. I’ve personally seen them take down a mouthy mage – rather quickly I might add.”

“Awesome,” Ethan said with a chuckle. “So, we’re going up against a group of warrior librarians that are supported by some unknown magic defense system. I see now why we’re going to try to sneak through.”

“Assuming we can even get inside. How exactly are we going to get in?” Marie asked calmly, her eyes on Cecil. “I’m certain you must have some plan.”

The short man nodded curtly, his hand running through his beard.

“We need to go underneath the wards,” he said, watching the group, as though testing to see if they could guess at his strategy.

Melissa sighed. “Stop trying to be mysterious. Just tell us how we’re getting in.”

Cecil glared at the rogue. “We will have to use the sewers.” He pulled out another scroll, unfurling it along the table. This parchment showed a map of a round disc, radial lines running out from the center. Riley could see that the lines connected to a large circle in the middle of the disc.

“Each of the twelve discs that make up Vaerwald were initially designed to last quite a long time. Obviously, the original engineers needed to take into account growing population density and relevant utilities. This included a working sewage system.” He noted Melissa’s bored expression. “Or have you never wondered why you didn’t have to throw your waste over the side of the discs?”

“Never occurred to me,” the rogue responded with a yawn. Riley couldn’t help but notice that she took pleasure in antagonizing the enchanter. She was like a slightly more homicidal version of Jerry.

Cecil sighed. “Ingrates,” he muttered. “Anyway, large tubing was installed inside each disc that stretches out from the center. Waste funnels down these central lines into a single main sewage line that runs through the heart of the city. Once the refuse is landside, an aqueduct runs it out to the coast.”

His fingers traced a path from a portion of the tubing toward the edge of the ring. Riley suddenly realized she was looking at the sewage system for the level ten disc, the faint outlines of the buildings

overlaid on the map of the sewers. She could just make out the rough border of the library.

“The buildings have changed over time – accidental explosions and what not. The Great Library, however, has remained in the same place. It rests directly over one of the main sewer lines. The library should have its own access to the tunnels since it’s such a large structure. As a result, if we enter the sewer through one of the maintenance grates outside, we should be able to access the library through the lower levels.”

“You intend for us to crawl through a sewer?” Melissa asked in an incredulous tone. “What a shit plan...” Ethan stifled a laugh while Lucas punched him gently in the side.

“You can always stay behind,” Cecil grouched.

“Stop it,” Marie snapped. “It’s a workable strategy. As Cecil explained, we can’t assault the outside of the structure or enter during the day.” She glanced at the little man. “What do we do once we’re inside?”

He snorted, eyeing Melissa out of the corner of his eye. “We’ll have to make our way up through the lower levels and the Great Hall to the laboratories. Ideally, we would manage to do this without being detected.”

“And getting back out?” Riley asked softly.

Cecil turned to her, a smile slowly curling his lips. This was the first time she had seen the dwarf look somewhat happy. She decided that she didn’t particularly like it. “Leave that to me. I can get us out in a hurry if need be.”

“We are risking a lot here on a hunch,” Ethan added, his eyes on the map. “If we do get caught, it sounds like we will be dealing with the library’s defenses and the librarians. If we take too long, I expect that the city guards will show up.”

Marie nodded. “The fire guild patrols the upper levels regularly. We could probably handle a small patrol, but, if an alarm is sounded, we would only have maybe thirty minutes before a larger group managed to gather and make it to the library from level eleven.”

Cecil’s grin widened. “Unless I blow the tubing on that level remotely. I could buy us nearly an hour that way. They’d have to take the long way through the low streets.”

The small man glanced at Melissa. “I suppose your group could delay them further once they’re on level one, assuming they’re up to the task.”

The red-haired rogue looked surprised. “You’re planning to destroy the tubing, and we get to kill some mages?” She slapped him on the back. “I knew I always liked you.” This earned her a weary sigh from the enchanter.

“You can’t kill them,” Marie said, eyeing the rogue. “You can injure

and maim, but nothing a journeyman light mage couldn't heal – and no deaths! Our goal is just to slow them down.”

“Really? You *have* grown soft in your old age. I remember a time when...”

“Those days are long gone,” Marie interrupted her bluntly, her eyes flaring with anger. “Our goal here is to protect the city and find more information on the cultists – it isn't to kill off the city guards. The same goes for the librarians. You can incapacitate them, but you can't kill them.”

“Besides, even if we do find the cultists and stop this plague somehow, we don't want to end up in a magical prison,” Riley added. “Blowing up part of the city seems bad enough.”

Cecil shrugged. “I can trigger the explosives late at night. I doubt this will cause much collateral damage at that time of day since few people use the tubes after dusk except for travelers. That won't make much difference; they always come back. Besides, the earth guild can replace the tubes in less than a day.”

Riley could only imagine what Vivian's reaction would be to that particular chore. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to find out. Ethan was right, though. This plan was risky. However, as she surveyed the maps laid out on the table, she didn't see any other way. They were going to have to gamble big. Hopefully, it would pay off.

Riley's gaze shifted to the group around the table. They were an odd bunch – an old matron of an orphanage, a disgruntled enchanter, what she could only assume was a hired assassin and her gang, and a group of novice adventurers. Yet she saw an oddly determined look in their eyes. They were all in this room for different reasons, but none of them looked like they planned to back out of this crazy plan.

“What's the next step?” Riley asked in the silence that had descended across the room.

Marie glanced up at her from the map. “The sun will set soon. We all need to get ready. I expect it's going to be a long night.”

# Chapter 21 - Disgusting

The group was walking quickly and quietly down the streets of level eleven. Ornate stone buildings loomed over them on either side of the street, their windows dark and vacant. In contrast to the last time Riley had visited the library, the streets were nearly deserted. Riley could only assume that the NPCs had turned in for the evening and that the players had moved to different portions of the city since they couldn't visit the library at night.

Glancing beside her, Riley noticed that Lucas and Emma trudged along silently. The light mage had been almost mute since her betrayal, as though she were worried the others would abandon her if she drew any attention to herself. Riley expected that the couple's eventual conversation outside of the game wasn't going to be fun.

*Maybe this is a great reason to just not date anyone,* she thought somberly.

"First, we meet this girl who wants to travel to Vaerwald. Looks like her gear sucks, so why not help her out?" Ethan grumbled good-naturedly. "Now we're going to crawl through a sewer in a magical city to infiltrate a library full of emotionless warrior librarians.

"Oh, and it's all because we're looking for a group of cultists that are hell-bent on summoning some sort of demi-god and are willing to destroy a whole city to do it." He shook his head. "God, I love this game...

"Does this happen to you a lot?" he asked Riley.

She hesitated for a moment, thinking back over the last couple of weeks in-game. "Well, yeah I guess. I do seem to get into these sorts of situations a lot lately."

She raised a hand as she heard the sound of voices ahead of them. Her group slinked back against the front of one of the nearby buildings, hiding in the shadows of the building's enormous columns. A group of four red-robed mages walked past a street a few dozen yards away. Flames flickered at the tops of their staves, brightly illuminating the area around them as they bickered and shoved each other animatedly.

"A patrol?" Lucas asked.

"It looks like it, but you all would probably know better than me," Riley said. She was still acclimating to the mage city. She pulled up her map, realizing they were only a few streets away from their meeting spot.

"Let's be careful," Riley continued. "Since there aren't many people on the street, it would be better to avoid the patrols. We don't



exactly have a good reason to be here.” The other members of the group nodded in response.

They made the rest of the journey in complete silence, staying alert and wary of the fire mage guards. Luckily, they made it to the rendezvous location without incident. It appeared that Cecil had marked off an abandoned alley for their meet-up. As they entered the narrow space between two buildings, Riley heard a faint whistle, and a cool blade pressed against her neck.

“What’s the password?” a feminine voice purred.

“There is no password,” Riley replied in a weary voice.

“Touché,” Melissa replied as the blade withdrew. “But what’s the point of a secret meeting spot without a password? Cecil has no flare for clandestine meetings.”

“Oh? Is that necessary for breaking into a library? You’ve been treating this like some sort of game,” the small man grouched, walking out from behind a stack of crates. He grunted as he hoisted a pack onto his back. Riley noticed that he had strapped a series of pouches and sacks across his waist and chest.

“Everything is a game,” Melissa explained as she flipped her dagger through the air and caught it by the tip. “Most people just don’t realize that they’re playing.” She winked at Riley before sliding her blade back into its sheath.

Riley heard a sigh, and Marie walked out from behind the crate near Cecil. The older woman had shed her worn woolen attire and was now clothed in a full set of leather armor. The material looked like it had seen many conflicts, evident by the scratches and tears that marred the surface. Yet it was still well-oiled and cared for. Riley noted a crimson lining peeking from the inside of Marie’s hood, the joints of her equipment, and embroidered into the sheaths swinging at her waist. She was a bit surprised; this didn’t look the typical attire of the matron of an orphanage.

“Thank goodness you all showed up. They have been bickering for the last hour,” Marie said in a weary voice.

“I figured you would stay with your rogues,” Riley said to Melissa.

The red-haired woman looked at her in surprise. “Are you kidding? As much as I’d love to stab some fire mages, I’m not giving up a chance to break into the library!”

Cecil rubbed at his neck. “I managed to set the explosives on level eleven, and they’re scheduled to go off in a couple of hours. That should buy us plenty of time.”

“Are we ready to move then?” Marie asked as she surveyed the group carefully. “There likely won’t be any turning back once we’re in the sewers.”

"I'm ready," Ethan said, shouldering his sword. "Let's do this thing!"

Cecil raised an eyebrow. "We'll see if you still feel that way once you are walking through a foot of muck." The small man reached down beside him, grabbing a crowbar that leaned against the crate. With a swift gesture, he struck the floor of the alley and yanked hard. A manhole cover flipped open and dropped to the ground with a solid thud. Riley could see a ladder leading down into the sewers, and the rungs trailed off into the darkness.

"After you," Cecil said to Ethan, gesturing at the hole.

The warrior grimaced but stepped forward and started down the ladder. The group quickly filed down after him and soon found themselves standing in a dark tunnel. Riley had no trouble seeing clearly in the gloom, taking in the large passage that stretched out before her. The tube was over a dozen feet across, and a river of muck ran down the center. A raised metal platform was installed along either side, providing a makeshift walkway.

A white light suddenly flared in the tunnel, Emma's staff igniting and pushing back at the encroaching darkness. "I'm glad my sense of smell is muted in-game," the light mage muttered, eyeing the filth that ran past them.

"Amen to that," Lucas added, glancing awkwardly at Emma.

"You'll get used to it. We need to get moving. We'll put the muscle in front," Cecil said, motioning at Ethan. The burly warrior took up the point position, switching to his longsword and shield. He kept his weapon at the ready as they slowly moved forward. Emma and Lucas stayed close behind him, the light mage's staff illuminating the tunnel. The walkway was cramped, just barely allowing two people to walk side-by-side.

Riley took up a position in the rear of the group next to Marie. She noticed that the older woman scanned the tunnel with a calm, practiced gaze while keeping a hand on her dagger. She barely made any noise as she moved, a remarkable feat on the rusty metallic platform.

"What did Melissa mean back at the orphanage when she referred to your past?" Riley asked Marie tentatively. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want," she added quickly.

The older woman eyed her with a cautious expression. "I have yet to meet a person with a pristine past. Like most people, my particular story is riddled with events that I prefer to forget – and a few that I deeply regret. Suffice it to say that I wasn't always the matron of an orphanage."

Marie's eyes clouded as she recalled some unknown memory. Then her gaze refocused and she watched Riley with a renewed

clarity. “I have witnessed you wielding dark mana. I expect you understand how the sensation flushes away all of your guilt and reservation, allowing you to act on your desires. This can be incredibly helpful in some situations. However, it is also easy to go too far, especially if you are upset.”

“I... I have noticed that myself,” Riley said softly, recalling some of her actions while under the effects of her dark mana. She also hadn’t missed the implication of the older woman’s words. Was Marie a practitioner of dark magic?

“You are just starting along this path,” Marie continued in a weary voice. “As you continue, it will only get darker. The trail also splits and branches at multiple points. There are many applications of dark magic you haven’t encountered yet.

“It is easy to lose yourself and hurt those around you. Unfortunately, I have experienced that myself. I try to give back by caring for the children in my orphanage.” Marie’s expression hardened, and she eyed the tunnel ahead. “Yet my mistakes still haunt me. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“What...?” Riley began but was cut off by a shout ahead of them. The pair couldn’t see anything from their position at the back of the group, and so they didn’t know what was coming.

“Jump to the other walkway,” Marie ordered, her eyes suddenly pulsing with dark mana as she motioned to the other platform across the river of sludge. “We will be useless back here.”

Without any warning, the older woman pressed her back to the wall and then launched forward, hurtling over the expanse. Her feet landed lightly against the metal grate on the other side, barely shaking the walkway. Taking a deep breath, Riley followed her example, springing across the tunnel. She landed with shaky steps and Marie grabbed her arm, pulling her onto the walkway.

Riley could finally see what was coming. And she really wished she hadn’t. Gigantic white worms roiled down the tunnel en masse. Their bodies were nearly a foot in diameter, and they each appeared to be over a dozen feet long. As she watched in horror, their mouths opened, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth. The light from Emma’s staff reflected off their skin, revealing a thick layer of slime.

“What are those?” Riley asked. Their group was already moving into position on the other side of the tunnel. Ethan hoisted his shield, and his skin took on a gray appearance as he cast *Stone Skin* while Lucas, Emma, and Cecil lined up behind him.

“Crawlers,” Marie answered, her gaze steady. “They are resistant to physical attacks. Their bites are also poisonous – a paralytic – and their blood is heavily acidic. If you get into close quarters, avoid being hit.”

Riley quickly inspected the worms, discovering that they were over level 300. *Holy shit*, she thought. What chance did she have against something like that? Much less a dozen of the worms.

Before she could react, Marie was already darting forward toward the Crawlers. Shaking herself out of her stupor, Riley swung her bow from her shoulder as she simultaneously summoned her dark mana. The chill energy crawled up her spine, its tendrils creeping into her skull. Even as she readied herself to fire, Lucas released a bolt of lightning and the energy arced down through the tunnel. The bolt splashed against the oncoming worms, scarring their skin but not causing any lasting damage.

Maybe she would have better luck. Riley drew back an arrow, sighting along the shaft and carefully avoiding Marie's nimble form as dark energy began to accumulate along the tip. Her *Void Arrow* quickly grew in power as she channeled her meager mana pool into the spell, the arrow dipping and weaving as a ball of black energy accumulated. Once she couldn't control the mana any longer, Riley released, and the bolt raced forward.

The *Void Arrow* slammed into the mass of worms, momentarily stunning them as tendrils of dark energy lashed at their skin. Their pale flesh peeled away in layers, yet she watched in shock as the dark energy didn't quite penetrate the worms' tough skin. The Crawlers recovered a few seconds later, continuing their mad rush toward the party.

*How the hell are we supposed to kill these things?*

"Marie," Cecil shouted from the other side of the walkway, hurling a package toward her. The woman spun, grabbing the satchel and then tumbled forward into a roll before swiftly regaining her footing. Without stopping, she darted toward the oncoming horde of creatures. Riley could see that Melissa was already moving on the other side of the platform, carrying a similar package.

As she ran, Marie opened the satchel, pulling out a handful of red crystals and tossing them ahead of her at the worms. Melissa mirrored her actions on the other side of the tunnel, and both women raised a hand to shield their eyes.

The horde in front of them suddenly exploded in a blaze of flame. The inferno raged outward in an expanding ring from the point of impact, flames licking at the walls as the Crawlers let out tortured screams. Their shrill cries rang through the narrow tunnel and sent a shiver up Riley's spine. Then, as fast as it appeared, the fire began to sputter out, revealing the burnt husks of nearly a dozen pale worms. Only a couple in back remained, and Melissa and Marie were already moving to engage them.

Riley watched in amazement as the older woman darted

forward, her daggers instantly appearing in her hands. Dark energy collected along the metal as she stabbed forward, her blades slicing cleanly through the worm's thick flesh. Bright green blood jetted from the wounds, sizzling where it struck the walls of the tunnel. Yet the woman didn't stop moving and nimbly rolled forward to avoid the acid, striking again and again in rapid-fire succession. As the last strike landed, the worm's head was severed from its body and dropped limply to the floor in a pool of its own acidic blood.

Meanwhile, Melissa sprinted down the other end of the tunnel. She suddenly sprang against the wall beside her, launching herself airborne. As she glided over the remaining worm, she stabbed downward with both her daggers, cutting through its skin near the base of its mouth. The worm's vicious teeth were visible as it tried to snap at the rogue. A spray of acid splattered against the roof of the tunnel in a line as the woman landed lightly on the other platform. A few seconds later, the worm's decapitated corpse dropped to the floor.

Wow, Riley thought. A quick inspection of the two women revealed only a series of question marks next to their names. That wasn't surprising, especially after her own attacks hadn't even phased the worms. She had a long way to go.

"You've still got it!" Melissa said, patting Marie on the shoulder as the two women wiped off their blades and sheathed them.

"I never lost it," Marie replied with an arched eyebrow.

"That's all nice, but why the hell is this tunnel filled with those worms?" Ethan called out, interrupting their banter.

"The sewers are riddled with Crawlers," Cecil explained with a shrug as he readjusted the pouches at his waist. "They eat and digest the waste and prevent blockages. Normally, they are quite resilient and are only susceptible to fire and magic weapons." He eyed Melissa. "Apparently raw strength and a healthy dose of crazy works just as well."

The rogue shrugged. "That combination has always worked for me."

"So there are more?" Riley asked cautiously.

"Of course," Cecil replied.

"Don't worry," Marie interjected. "We have been here before. Melissa and I can use Cecil's crystals to clear out the packs and then pick off any stragglers. It's slow going, but relatively safe once you get the hang of it."

Ethan snorted softly, looking at Riley with an expression that clearly said that these people were crazy. She nodded slightly, her eyes on Marie and Melissa as the group collected themselves. Her expression was somber. They had barely begun to infiltrate the library, and it was already clear that she and the other players were

grossly outmatched. She needed to keep her wits about her. Riley was going to have to use her head rather than pure brawn if she was going to complete this quest.

## Chapter 22 - Sneaky

Nearly an hour later, Cecil stopped and turned to the group. “And here we are,” he said while gesturing at a thick metal grate ahead of them. “According to my maps, this should be the entrance into the lower levels of the library.”

“Thank god,” Ethan grunted. He inspected the metal grate and tugged at it experimentally. “Except how do we get through?” he asked. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he eyed the metal dubiously. The grate wasn’t designed to act as a doorway and appeared to have been welded into the stone walls of the sewer.

“A little bit of faith,” Cecil replied as he rummaged in his pack.

Ethan looked at the little man skeptically as he pulled out a vial that glowed a vibrant yellow and a small brush. Cecil handled the vial delicately, carefully unscrewing the lid and gently dabbing the brush into the substance. As the group watched in confusion, he set to work painting the metal around the edges of the door.

Once he was finished, he screwed the bottle shut before placing it back in his bag. He then pulled out a bag of blue powder and a pair of goggles. Eyeing the group behind him, he strapped on his new eyewear. “You all should stand back for this.”

The group moved back swiftly. “What’s he doing?” Riley asked Marie.

“There are several fields of enchanting. Cecil specializes in enchanting crystals and other stones by imbuing them with mana. He has little magic himself, but his creations can be quite powerful. The shards you saw us throw at the Crawlers are a good example. He managed to convince a fire mage to channel raw mana into them. Those particular crystals are quite fragile. When they are crushed, they release the fire mana and explode.”

Marie gestured at the grate a few dozen feet away, where Cecil was moving industriously. “There are also numerous other applications. Mana crystals can be ground fine and turned into pastes and powders. Different types can also be combined...”

She trailed off as bright flashes of emerald light blossomed from the grate, momentarily blinding the group. As Riley’s vision began to clear, she could see that the metal had completely dissolved, and a pool of acid now rested where the grate had once stood.

“...they can be combined to create interesting effects,” Marie finished, gesturing at the liquefied substance.

“I imagine that would be useful for a number of completely *legal* things,” Lucas said sarcastically, eyeing Melissa and Marie as the

group moved back toward the grate.

Marie chuckled. "Cecil certainly isn't above making some coin – even when he suspects that his crystals will be used for less than noble purposes."

"That's why we keep our grumpy little buddy around," Melissa said, putting her arm around Cecil. The small man's eyes closed, a pained expression flitting across his face.

"If you're done, can you please go inside? You need to scout the floor and clear a path," Cecil said to the red-haired rogue.

"Anything for you sugar lumps," Melissa replied with a laugh, sprinting into the corridor behind the grate as she pulled her hood over her hair and activated *Sneak*. Soon she vanished from view.

"And remember not to kill anyone," Marie called behind her before turning back to the group. "Let's proceed a bit more slowly. The bottom levels should be storage rooms and dormitories. Hopefully, most of the librarians are asleep by now."

Taking her advice, the group tread softly down the winding hallway. It soon became apparent that this level of the library was devoted to storage. Each room off the main hallway contained barrels and crates filled with clothing and food. Riley also noticed that more than one room held paper and printing materials. The packages were carefully wrapped in wax paper and magically sealed to prevent moisture damage.

At the end of the hallway, they reached a set of stairs leading farther up into the library. The group stopped short at the top of the stairs, and Marie peered around the corner. "This looks like the dormitory level."

"How observant of you," Melissa said dryly, appearing nearby as she dropped *Sneak*. "I've already scouted and mapped the floor." She waved her hand, and a projected map of the library appeared in front of her.

Melissa glanced at the enchanter with a frown. "This floor's layout doesn't match your maps, Cecil."

The small man grunted. "Those maps are older than you. What did you expect? I'm sure the librarians have undertaken several renovation projects over the years."

A grin drifted across the rogue's face as she eyed the enchanter. "Uh huh. So I guess that means you need me, right? That I'm super useful? Some might even say *essential*..."

She laughed at his irritated expression as her fingers traced a path from their location to a nearby hallway. "We are currently in a side corridor leading to the lower levels. There is a single main hallway that runs the length of the floor, and most of the branching halls contain private rooms for the librarians.



“Based on Cecil’s maps, my guess is that we are just below the Great Hall right now.” The rogue sighed before continuing. “The bad news is that we need to pass through what looks like the dining hall to make it to the service entrance up to the next level.”

“Why is that a problem?” Ethan asked.

The red-haired woman looked at him as though he had hit his head. “The *problem* is that some of us are less stealthy than others, Muscles. We run a risk of being caught passing through that room. I’ve also noticed that several of the beds are vacant. Perhaps late-night assignments? Hard to say, but it increases the risk of detection.”

Riley was impressed with the rogue’s efficiency. Despite her joking tone, the woman was no-nonsense when it came to infiltrating the library. Melissa was amazingly fast, and her *Sneak* skill must be maxed if she had managed to check the individual bedrooms without alerting anyone.

“So, we stay quiet and try to make it to the stairs up to the stacks. I don’t see any other options,” Riley said as she studied the map.

“Basically,” Melissa said. Her finger traced a winding path to the dining hall. “You all should take this route. I’ll move ahead and take out any librarians who might decide to go for a midnight snack.”

With that, the rogue raced back down the hall, quickly disappearing from view. The group made their way forward carefully, Cecil grumbling under his breath. Riley could have sworn she heard him mention something about irritating thieves and some choice locations he’d prefer she stored her daggers.

The hallways on this level were illuminated by crystals mounted into wooden latticework that ran the length of the ceiling. The light from the crystalline lamps pulsed softly, casting long shadows as the group passed. Branching hallways broke off from their route, leading deeper into the dormitories. They took care to step quietly past the solid oak doors that lined the hall, following the route Melissa had plotted.

Well, they *tried* to be quiet. Ethan failed spectacularly at this goal, his armor jostling against walls and the clink of metal echoing down the silent hallway with each step. Riley was just about to tell him to simply un-equip his armor when they mercifully made it to the dining hall.

The enormous room was deserted, long wooden tables resting in neat rows. Crystalline orbs drifted through the air, faintly illuminating the space. Riley couldn’t help but think of the cafeteria at Richmond. Her fists clenched as the painful images flooded her mind again and her dark mana surged – the icy chill driving back the memories. She tugged at the edge of her hood to hide her eyes from

the rest of the group.

“Good,” Melissa said, appearing beside the group abruptly. “I only had to take care of two of the librarians who decided to investigate what sounded like a full guard patrol marching through the halls,” she added this last part while staring pointedly at Ethan.

“I can’t help that I’m wearing mail armor,” he muttered.

The group made their way across the open expanse to the service entrance on the other side of the dining hall. Just as Riley was about to open the door that led to the stairwell, it slid open on its own, and a brown-robed librarian ran smack into her. She recovered quickly, grabbing the man and pushing him against the wall. A dagger rested against his throat in an instant.

A familiar, placid pair of eyes met hers. “Clarence?” Riley asked in confusion.

“You know this guy?” Melissa asked, looking at the librarian skeptically.

“I guess you could say that,” Lucas interjected with a puzzled expression. “This is the same librarian that we met when we first came to the library. He told us about the books on dark magic that were being delivered to the fire guild.”

Meanwhile, Melissa tapped her lips with the tip of her dagger thoughtfully. “Well, we can’t exactly let him go now. What should we do with him?” Melissa’s eyes moved to the counters along the side of the dining hall – which Riley assumed was used as some sort of medieval equivalent of a buffet. “We could knock him out and hide him behind a counter.”

The librarian’s eyes widened slightly, but he didn’t seem nearly as fearful or as surprised as Riley would have expected. She watched the man carefully. Once they were upstairs, they would need to navigate the labyrinth of bookshelves that lined the Great Hall. From her limited experience walking through the stacks, Riley suspected that the books and shelves might actually move on their own. Melissa was an exceptional scout, but she wasn’t certain whether that would be enough in a magical library. They were also running against the clock. She would really prefer to avoid blowing up the tubing on level eleven.

“What if we use him instead?” Riley suggested, pulling back her blade. “I doubt we will get through the stacks easily without him.” She turned back to the librarian. “Do you remember us, Clarence?”

The man nodded slightly as he massaged his neck, yet he made no move to escape or fight back. “I do indeed, ma’am. You were the travelers asking for information regarding our runners. I believe you mentioned something about a missing child.”

“Well, that wasn’t *exactly* true,” Riley replied. “We’re actually

investigating the outbreak of a plague within the city. It seems to have first affected the children that were running books for the library. We now suspect that someone accessing the library's laboratories is involved."

The man nodded his head in understanding. "We have heard rumors regarding this magical plague from our visitors. While I understand your urgency, the laboratories above the great hall are unfortunately off limits to most guests. The library is also *closed* at the moment."

"Obviously, we know that. We aren't exactly asking for permission," Melissa added, giving the man a toothy smile. "But we would be ever so appreciative if you would show us to those rooms." As she added this last part, she began picking at her nails with the tip of her dagger.

"I am duty bound to prevent access from visitors that lack the necessary credentials," he replied, as though reciting a passage from a manual.

Riley bit her lip. Maybe she could try to reason with the man. If anything, these librarians seemed hyper-logical and emotionless – likely a product of their low affinities. "What do your rules say about granting us access to restricted areas in the case of an emergency?"

The man cocked his head slightly. "In the event of fire, flood, mass transmogrification, or explosions, we are authorized to provide access to other areas of the library in order to protect the guests."

"What a weird set of emergencies," Ethan chuckled softly. "How often do things explode here?"

Clarence's expression sobered. "More often than you might expect. The books can be mischievous at times. This is also why the laboratories upstairs are strictly off limits."

A thoughtful expression crept across Melissa's face. "So, are we still technically *guests*? Even if we broke in through the sewers."

Clarence's brow furrowed in thought for a moment and he stumbled in his reply. "Well, intruders are not subject to our rules. However, the headmaster did explain that the emergency protocols supersede everything else."

Melissa's lips curled into a broad smile, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Oh, really? Then I suppose we just need an emergency, huh? That's not a problem at all!" Before anyone could react, the rogue swiped a pouch dangling at Cecil's hip, unlatched the cover and promptly tossed the whole package at the wooden tables filling the room.

Time seemed to slow for a moment as Riley watched familiar red crystals tumble out of the bag and float through the air. The stones eventually bounced off the wooden tables. As the crystals

crumpled under the impact, a massive explosion blossomed in the center of the room, and a whirlwind of flames swept through the hall. The blast was so intense that it threw most of the group into the nearby wall. Riley slammed into the hard surface, and the wind was knocked from her lungs as she struggled to stay on her feet.

As she recovered and turned to look behind her, horror curled in her stomach. An inferno raged through the room. The fire was swiftly spreading, igniting the tables and flames leaping to the nearby walls and furniture. Tendrils of fire were already lapping at the woodwork of the ceiling, threatening to ignite the whole structure. The heat was so intense near the center of the hall that the orbs along the ceiling had begun to burst, raining a multicolored stream of energy down on the raging inferno.

“What the hell was that?” Emma snapped at the rogue as she massaged her shoulder.

The rest of the group just looked at Melissa in shock, their expressions warring between confusion and outrage as they witnessed the maelstrom of flame. Over the ringing in her ears, Riley thought she could hear something that sounded remarkably like an alarm blaring in the background.

Melissa folded her arms defensively at their accusing expressions. “I was moving this show along. I can’t stand all this talking.”

Then she glanced at Clarence, and a familiar gleam entered her eyes. “I notice there has been an explosion... and, well, there’s some fire too. I think you need to show us the way to the upper floors before we’re harmed by the flames. Unless, of course, you want me to turn someone into a chicken too. Cecil might have a crystal for that.”

The librarian didn’t manage a response. He just looked back and forth between the raging inferno that was spreading through the room and Melissa’s smirk. His mouth hung ajar, and Riley could have sworn she saw a glint of fear in his normally placid eyes as he looked at the rogue. Not that she could blame him.

## Chapter 23 - Harried

“You’re insane!” Cecil yelled at the rogue as the group sprinted up the stairs to the Great Hall. Melissa was practically dragging Clarence behind her. The man seemed stunned by the sudden turn of events and was struggling to keep his feet under him.

“I think you mean *brilliant*. We have a librarian to help navigate the stacks now, and the fire should keep the rest of them busy for a while,” the rogue said as they neared the top of the stairs.

“Except you run the risk of burning down the whole library,” Marie retorted as she ran up the steps. “And people may die down there. What happened to not killing anyone?”

“No one is dead... yet,” Melissa huffed.

The rogue abruptly reached the top of the stairs. With a heave, she shouldered the door open, the hinges splintering from the force of the blow. Then she tossed the librarian into the room. Massive bookshelves towered nearly fifty feet into the air, dozens of books flapping excitedly between them. Even on this level, the library’s alarms were blaring, the sound echoing over the bookshelves and drowning out the sound of scraping paper.

As the group filtered into the room, the red-haired rogue grabbed Clarence. Smacking him hard across the face, she barked, “Snap out of it. We need you to guide us to the stairs to the next level.”

The librarian’s gaze refocused on the rogue, his expression still uncertain but regaining some clarity. “Y-yes, ma’am. It’s on the northern edge of the room,” he managed to stutter. “We’ll have to go through the stacks.”

“Then, by all means, lead the way,” Melissa urged, pulling him to his feet and giving him a shove toward the shelves. “I suggest moving quickly. We probably only have a few minutes until the blaze spreads to this level.”

The group moved at a light jog through the shelves, Clarence taking point. Riley didn’t exactly agree with Melissa’s actions, but she had to admit that it was an effective strategy – assuming, of course, that they could trust Clarence.

“I should warn you,” the librarian mentioned over his shoulder. “Now that the library’s alarms have been sounded, its defense systems will engage automatically. The system doesn’t distinguish between various types of emergencies well.”

“Oh shit,” Cecil muttered as he trotted along beside Riley.

“What?” she asked the enchanter. “What does that mean?”

He didn't need to answer. As the group darted through a hole in the bookshelves, they found themselves face-to-face with one of the paper golems that Riley had seen earlier. Before she could react, Melissa was already racing toward the creature. As she approached it, the rogue leapt forward, her blades ripping through the parchment that made up its face. Her daggers shredded through the paper, neatly severing the creature's head. The papers and books that made up its body promptly tumbled to the ground, scattering in every direction.

Melissa turned back to the Cecil. "That wasn't so bad. What's the problem?"

The enchanter just shook his head and started jogging down the row of shelves in the other direction, pushing the librarian to keep moving. "It's not dead. You better keep running."

Riley heard the rustle and scrape of paper and whirled around, her eyes widening. The parchment strewn along the ground behind the rogue began to piece itself back together, the body of the golem quickly retaking its original shape. Most importantly, it was no longer missing its head. The creature then turned to the group – its void-like eyes fixed on them.

A flurry of paper peeled away from the golem and swiftly folded into several shapes that eerily resembled spears. The projectiles then rocketed toward the group. Riley dove to the side into a roll, narrowly dodging the missiles that whistled past her head.

As she jumped back to her feet, she could see that Ethan had shielded Lucas and Emma. However, a spear was embedded in Cecil's leg, blood pouring from the wound. "God damn it that hurts," he hissed.

Melissa looked at the small man and then back at the paper golem. "Um, so maybe we should keep running..."

"No kidding," Cecil shouted at her as he ripped the spear from his leg.

"Ethan, grab Cecil. Emma, heal up his leg," Riley ordered, taking control of the situation as she backed away from the golem.

The burly warrior grabbed the small man, throwing him over his shoulder as multiple flashes of light struck his body. Cecil's curses were drowned out by the sound of crunching paper and the obnoxious alarm. Meanwhile, the group began darting away from the golem even as another barrage of spears were forming in the air around the golem. Riley pulled her bow from her back, nocking an arrow and channeling a new *Void Arrow*.

As the dark energy reached a climax, she jumped forward, pivoting on her heel at the same time. Riley twisted in the air and fired simultaneously before landing lightly on the ground and continuing her sprint. She spared a glance behind her and saw the missile strike the golem, malignant obsidian energy lashing out in all directions. Her arrow created a vortex that sucked in the paper spears,

destroying the projectiles before the golem could fire them. However, she didn't seem to have caused any lasting damage to the creature.

"How do you kill the golems?" Riley shouted at Cecil over the blaring alarm.

The enchanter glanced at her sourly from where he rested on Ethan's shoulder. "You can't. Golems are entirely magic creations. They don't have health like normal creatures; they are sustained solely by mana. These golems are tapping into the library's mana crystals. Which means that they will continue to reform as long as the library is still standing."

"We will just have to slow them down," Marie huffed. "Perhaps fire would be the most efficient way to destroy the paper?"

"That would be a great plan," Cecil grouched. "Except some idiot rogue used all of my fire crystals. My apologies. Some *brilliant* rogue," he added sarcastically.

"It was still a good idea," Melissa muttered as she sprinted along beside them.

The group was approaching an intersection in the bookcases, halls branching off in several directions. Riley could see two golems shambling toward them down one of the hallways. Her eyes widened as she saw their bodies transform, the paper folding and compressing at a lightning fast pace. Soon she was looking at two large origami wolves, replete with foot-long paper fangs. This form was clearly much nimbler than the regular golems, and the wolves raced toward the group.

"Which way?" Melissa demanded, shaking Clarence as she eyed the approaching wolves. The librarian was also staring at the transformed golems with a look of dread on his face.

"Umm, left," he managed, pointing away from the wolves. Melissa didn't hesitate, sprinting down the hallway with the group behind her.

"You get the one on the right, Lucas. A regular lightning bolt should do the trick," Riley ordered as they ran, already nocking another arrow and drawing her bow. They might not be able to destroy the golems, but they needed to slow them down.

The air mage nodded, lightning crackling along his staff as his free hand moved through a frantic series of gestures. Meanwhile, dark mana curled and coiled along Riley's bow. At her nod, the pair turned and fired simultaneously. A dark missile and blinding blast of lightning slammed into the two paper wolves racing toward them. The wolves promptly burst apart in a cloud of paper, seared parchment scattering everywhere.

With a glance over her shoulder, Riley could see the wolves were already beginning to reform. The whirlwinds of paper were

swiftly knitting themselves back together. Each of their strikes would only buy them a few seconds.

A scream echoed ahead of them. Riley turned to find Emma on the ground ahead of her. She was being assaulted by a group of books, and her health was dropping fast. The pages of the books had been transformed into needle-like lances, easily piercing through the mage's robes and skin. Even as Riley watched, a book flapping above the nearby shelves dropped into a steep dive, its lance pointed at the helpless light mage.

At the last moment, Ethan batted the book aside with his shield, turning to the mage and offering her some cover as he dragged her back to her feet. "We need to keep moving," he shouted, pushing her forward. "Heal yourself as we run and then keep healing the group."

The others were faring better than Emma. Melissa and Marie tossed throwing knives at the incoming books without slowing their headlong sprint. The missiles knocked the creatures off course and caused the books to crash into the nearby shelves. Even as new books tumbled from the stacks, they began flapping airborne – adding to the pack. Lucas and Riley sprinted to catch back up to the group. She silently counted down in her head, preparing to fire off the next round at the wolves behind them.

"We're almost there," Clarence cried ahead of the group. Riley was a bit surprised by how nimble the librarian could be when he was being chased by a horde of animated books. Some people just needed the right incentive.

They hit another crossroads among the shelves, and Clarence darted to the right, sprinting down the new hallway with the group hot on his heels. The horde of books was growing as they ran, with bird-like novels joining the growing mass. Riley could see another two massive, origami wolves joining the throng, sprinting down the adjacent hallways.

She fired another frantic shot behind her, and a deafening crack of lightning echoed down the hallway. Riley could see a doorway approaching down the corridor, her heart beating hard in her chest. Her stamina was nearly depleted, and she expected the others weren't faring much better, but they might still be able to make it.

"The door ahead leads to the stairwell," Clarence yelled over his shoulder.

It was at that moment that the shelves beside them exploded in a whirlwind of books and paper. A wooden piece of shelving slammed into Riley, knocking her back against the bookshelf beside her and shaving off a decent chunk of her health. A dull pain throbbed from her shoulder down through her elbow and a quick look at her combat log confirmed that her arm was broken. The unexpected blast had also



knocked most of the group off their feet, scattering them across the hallway.

As the other shrapnel and debris blew past Riley, her *Dodge* skill activated and time seemed to slow momentarily. That was how she caught sight of the massive creature that had barreled through the bookshelves in an eruption of books and scrolls. The creature's head and body gradually became visible through the cloud of parchment. A full-fledged dragon made of paper and books rested its enormous forelegs on the ruined shelving. It must have been nearly thirty feet tall, only its upper body visible through the hole it had carved in the bookshelves. Graceful, folded horns jutted from its head as its empty eye sockets scanned the hallway, quickly honing in on the group that was struggling to regain their feet.

"Oh shit," Ethan muttered beside Riley. She grabbed Lucas and pulled him to his feet as the warrior helped Emma. To make matters worse, the pack of book-birds and wolves were closing on them from behind. "Don't stop moving," Riley shouted as she held her injured arm. "Fucking run!"

The group didn't need any encouragement, sprinting toward the door at the end of the hallway. However, the paper dragon wasn't willing to part with its new prey that easily. Its chest heaved, and it craned its neck. Its massive maw opened wide and revealed rows of jagged teeth. Instead of a torrent of flame, a veritable flood of razor-sharp paper spewed forth, rolling down the hallway and quickly consuming the other parchment-creatures that barreled toward the group.

Riley spared a frantic glance over her shoulder, her eyes widening at the sight of the tidal wave of paper crashing toward them. Her legs pumped frantically as she sped toward the door on the heels of her group. The edge of the wall of paper inched closer, threatening to overtake her.

Then she fell through the doorway, landing heavily on her side as a thick metal door slammed shut behind her. She could hear the massive crunch of paper cascading against the door, and the entire wall trembled, dust cascading from the mortar between the enormous blocks of rock that made up the wall.

Each member of the group lay or sat at the bottom of the service staircase. A quick glance confirmed that they were all there, albeit heavily injured. Emma's health was red lining, and red blotches stained her white robe. She was frantically trying to heal herself. The others nursed their injuries, pulling potions from their packs and bandaging their wounds.

Melissa sat up and stretched, throwing her arms wide. Then she looked at the group as they recovered from their injuries, their expressions dazed. A giant grin was painted on her face. "So that was

a blast. What did you all think?”

## Chapter 24 - Experimental

It took a few minutes for the group to heal their injuries and regroup. Even inside the stairwell, Riley could hear the alarms blaring. They probably didn't have long before the librarians put out the fires in the dormitory and made their way through the Great Hall. Assuming they didn't inadvertently burn down the whole building, of course.

Cecil had done something to the door, painting brightly-colored substances around the frame. He insisted that his concoction wouldn't kill anyone, but it would slow down anyone who tried to catch up to the group or used this particular staircase. He also seemed a little worried that the paper creatures might eventually make it through the door. The scraping and banging on the other side of the wall certainly hadn't stopped so he might have a point.

"We need to get moving," Riley said once she noticed that the group had recovered.

Ethan rubbed at his neck. "I'm not sure I can handle another explosion or fire or massive chase by an army of animated origami." He glanced at Melissa as he said this, which only earned him a shit-eating grin.

"That does raise a good point," Marie interjected as the group started up the staircase. "What defenses are installed on this next level?"

All eyes turned to Clarence as she posed this question. The librarian looked a bit flustered by recent events but managed to squeak out, "This next floor is relatively safe, even during an emergency. The Headmaster decided that it was too dangerous to install safeguards given the somewhat volatile ingredients and creatures in the labs."

"Wait, rewind to that last part," Ethan said. "Volatile ingredients and creatures?"

Clarence nodded. "Yes. The library purchases and stores quite a few rare specimens. This area is intended to allow our more esteemed guests the opportunity to study and experiment in a safe place. Before the creation of the library, mages tended to perform their studies in their homes or guild halls. The results were less than optimal."

"What he means is that they destroyed entire city blocks by accident or created monster hybrids that would ravage a disc and take weeks to capture or kill," Cecil grumbled. "The Council outlawed private experimentation some time ago."

“But this stuff is safely contained upstairs, right?” Ethan pressed. “It isn’t running through the hallways or likely to pounce on us from around a corner? Or explode or somehow change into a dragon? You know, *hypothetically*.”

“Most ingredients and creatures are stored in specialized containment cells and rooms along the southern part of the second floor. Although the more popular specimens are often housed inside the lab rooms immediately above us,” Clarence explained patiently, seemingly oblivious to the warrior’s sarcasm. “There haven’t been any issues with a monster escaping in some time.”

“That’s not exactly the same as never,” Ethan grumbled.

The group lapsed into silence as they arrived at the library’s second floor. With the height of the massive Great Hall, they had to travel up several flights of stairs to make it to the top-level. Another solid metal door barred their entry.

“Show us which room is being used to store the undead before we leave the stairwell,” Riley said, gesturing at Clarence. The young man stared at her dumbly. “What’s wrong? Just project your map and show us where we need to go.”

“The librarians’ complete lack of magic has some unfortunate side effects,” Cecil offered for the flustered librarian. “One is that they aren’t able to easily use maps the way we can. Technically, most maps – even those handed out to novice travelers – require some small magical aptitude.”

“Fantastic,” Riley said. “So then tell us where we’re going.”

“There is a main hallway that runs the length of this floor. Like I said earlier, this end of the library houses all of the laboratory rooms. I believe that the undead specimen is being kept in the lab on the northeast corner of the building. We should be able to head left from here, and it’ll be the last room on the left.”

“Sounds easy enough. Let’s do it!” Melissa said, resting her hand on the door.

“Wait!” Riley interjected quickly. “Let’s move a little more carefully – Ethan at the front of the group; Melissa supporting him in *Sneak*. Emma, Lucas, and Cecil stay in the center. Marie and I will cover our rear.”

“Look at you being all tactical,” the rogue replied.

“We just got attacked by a dragon,” Riley responded in a dry tone. “We may also have a group of warrior librarians chasing us in a moment, and I’m skeptical that this floor isn’t going to pose any problems.”

“I agree,” Marie said, glaring at the red-haired woman. “We could afford to be more cautious.”

“I second that. Or third, I guess,” Lucas added, looking at

Emma's blood-stained robes.

"Fine. Fine. We will move in formation," Melissa said, waving her hand.

The group filed out of the staircase in an orderly fashion, taking up the pattern that Riley had described. The hallway on this floor was dark, only the occasional crystal scone faintly illuminating the corridor. The sound of the alarms was more muted here. Perhaps the librarians didn't reasonably expect anyone to make it to this floor.

They moved down the hallway slowly, following Riley's instructions and staying on high alert. She couldn't begin to imagine what might attack them. She was prepared for fire-breathing unicorns at this point.

Despite their caution, the group arrived in front of the labs a few minutes later without incident. "Well, that was anticlimactic," Melissa said in a bored voice, yanking open the door to the lab and stepping inside.

Shaking her head, Riley followed her. The laboratory was a mess. Rows of tables lined the room, oddly-shaped instruments and equipment riddling their surfaces. She saw what appeared to be a half-dissected eel sitting on one table with brightly-colored crystals lying beside it. Cages lined the walls of the room, a veritable menagerie of magical animals shifting within the enclosures and eyeing them curiously.

What caught and held Riley's attention, however, was the large metal cage on the far end of the room. Her eyes lit up as she saw it. It looked like the type of thing mages might use to hold a human-sized undead prisoner.

Moving across the room with quick steps, Riley soon stopped in front of the cage, her brow furrowed in confusion. "There isn't anything in here," she said, turning to look at Clarence. "Where is the undead?"

The young man walked up beside her, inspecting the cage calmly. "I assure you that this is where the undead specimen was being stored. Perhaps he was moved recently."

"Is there a log of where the 'specimens' are stored or moved?" Marie asked, eyeing the equipment on the tables.

Clarence nodded. "Yes, of course. Let me just check the register for this room. It'll only take a moment." He walked off to the far side of the laboratory, where a line of bookshelves rested against the wall. The remainder of the group instinctively shied away from the books. The memory of being attacked by a library was just a little too fresh.

"Melissa, perhaps you should go keep watch outside," Marie suggested, eyeing the bored-looking rogue. "Also, this should go without saying, but please don't start a fight for no reason."

The red-haired woman sighed and headed for the door. "Yes, ma'am," she offered with a mock salute before vanishing through the doorway.

"What are these crystals?" Lucas asked, plucking at an object on a nearby table.

Cecil glanced at the various tools laying on the worktable. "They are intended to measure magical affinity. It's important to measure a creature's mana during experimentation since it is easier to combine certain types of affinities. Just lift one and see for yourself."

Lucas picked up the crystal gently. After a few seconds, it began to glow a vibrant yellow, indicating his air magic affinity. "Interesting," he murmured, handing the crystal to Emma. As soon as the light mage grabbed the instrument, it shifted to a bright white – the light much more intense than when Lucas had held it.

"The intensity of the light usually indicates the strength of the creature's affinity. Of course, there are more accurate measuring tools, but these crystals can be used as a rough test. It looks like they were trying to combine an Elonquin Eel with air magic crystals..." the enchanter trailed off as he observed the creature on the table.

Cecil's eyes then jumped around the room, noting the cages filled with strange animals. "A Fire Pixie, a Ravenous Mole-rat, a Thunder Hawk," he said under his breath, naming each of the creatures. "This is an interesting assortment of creatures and affinities. I wonder what they were trying to do in here."

Riley was only half listening to their conversation, her eyes on Clarence. They had come a long way and had risked quite a bit to break into this laboratory. If the undead prisoner had somehow vanished along with the logs, she wasn't quite certain where they should head next. She could feel her stomach drop as she noticed the normally robotic librarian's mouth twitch into something resembling a frown.

"What is it?" she demanded, calling over to Clarence.

"There is no record of the undead being here," he explained, walking back over to the group. "The page with the recent logs has been ripped out."

As she took the book from him, Riley could indeed see where a page had been torn from the log book. She just stared at the page for a long moment, her mind whirling as she considered what to do next.

"So, this was all for nothing?" Ethan demanded, grabbing the book from her. "How could an undead person just disappear?"

"Maybe we could search the floor?" Marie suggested, her expression troubled. Riley could see that Lucas and Emma looked stunned as well. Surprisingly, she didn't see the "I-told-you-so" look on the light mage's face that she had been expecting.

“Um, folks,” Melissa said, appearing at the door and slamming it shut behind her. “We have a problem. The librarians may have started catching up to us. And by that, I mean that they are barreling down the hallway right now. I strongly suggest we get the hell out of here – like *immediately*.”

“How are we going to do that?” Emma demanded. “We certainly aren’t going back through the library.”

Cecil sighed. “I thought this might happen. I just need a few minutes. Can the rest you hold them off?”

Ethan shrugged. “We can try. Why don’t we move these tables around and block off the door? Here, Lucas, give me a hand.”

As the group started moving around her, Riley stood still – her thoughts spinning. What had she missed? There had to be something. After everything they had been through, this couldn’t just be a massive dead end. She forced herself to calm down, taking a few deep breaths. She needed to think about this logically.

What did the cultists want? The answer seemed to be mana. If that was the case, the plague might be manufactured to collect mana from those afflicted with the sickness. How would they have created that plague?

A clatter echoed through the room as Ethan swept the instruments off a nearby table, the crystals bouncing off the floor. He then shoved it toward the door. Riley’s eyes skimmed across animals in cages around the lab. They might need to use someplace like this lab.

How could they get in here, though? Even her group had difficulty and Clarence had been clear that this area was restricted to high-ranking mages. Maybe they had infiltrated a major guild hall? But that didn’t seem plausible. The lower ranks were possible, but a Master or Prefect? If she ruled that out, who else had access?

Riley heard a crash and could see that Ethan and Melissa were straining to hold the tables against the door as the librarians beat and pushed at the other side of the mound of furniture. They only had a few moments before they would breakthrough. Meanwhile, Cecil was doing something to the window near the door, muttering under his breath as he pulled an assortment of powders and crystals out of his pack. Marie and Emma stood near Riley, readying their weapons to fight off the librarians. And, finally, Clarence stood at the back of the group, calmly watching the commotion. His face was as placid and emotionless as ever.

Riley froze.

There was one group that had unfettered access to the labs, wasn’t there? How had she missed that connection? The librarians had free rein of the library. They would have had access to the children

that were running books. Hell, they could have even tampered with the log books to lead any investigation to the fire guild, and a librarian could have easily ripped the page out of the lab registry. But if she was right, which librarians were actually cultists? All of them or only a few members? How could she tell? How would they have managed to infiltrate their ranks? The questions swept through her mind in a wave.

“Riley!” Ethan shouted from across the room. “Snap out of it. They are going to be inside in a moment.”

Riley’s gaze darted to the doorway, where she could see the blockade beginning to crumble. It looked like the librarians had brought in some reinforcements. Then her eyes darted to the crystals along the floor, the recent conversation between Cecil and Lucas flitting through her mind. Acting on instinct, Riley grabbed one of the crystal instruments and crammed it into her pocket.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Cecil shouted over the crashing sound of furniture as he darted across the room. “Everyone get over here.” He motioned to the far corner of the room away from the windows. The group sprinted to the corner, huddling behind Ethan as he raised his shield.

“Close your eyes and cover your ears,” Cecil ordered. “We have about five seconds.”

Riley just barely squeezed her eyes shut in time, pressing her palms to her ears. She could feel the explosion reverberate back through the stone floor, and an immense pressure pushed her back into the wall and her teammates. As she opened her eyes, Riley gaped in surprise. A massive hole had been carved in the side of the library where the window had once stood. The explosion had also destroyed the blockade at the door and caved in the side of the wall leading back into the hallway.

“How...?” Lucas muttered.

“There aren’t any wards on the inside, boy,” Cecil grunted. “But we don’t have time to chat. The second round of bombs will go off in less than a minute.” He shoved the mage. “Now run! Everyone stay near Lucas.”

The group threw off their stupor and raced toward the opening. Ethan grabbed Clarence and forcefully dragged the librarian along. “Wait, we’re like three or four stories up,” Lucas shouted in a panicked voice. “And why are we staying near me?”

“It’s time to earn your keep, mage,” Cecil replied. “You better have picked up the *Gust* spell.”

The group jumped through the hole. Riley felt her feet leave the ground and her stomach lurch as she dropped. Time seemed to slow as the ground loomed in her vision. A massive blast rocked the



laboratory behind her, rubble and debris rushing through the air around them. Meanwhile, rain splattered across her face, the cool drops slowly sliding across her cheeks. Her mouth was pressed into a grim line as her eyes pulsed with dark energy. She had a promise to keep, even if it meant that she had to hunt down the librarians one by one.

## Chapter 25 - Infectious

“Cast now!” Cecil shouted, grabbing Lucas’ shoulder as the group free-fell toward the ground. The cobblestones were approaching rapidly. The skinny mage fumbled slightly, his fingers attempting to pass through the gestures of a spell as tendrils of air curled around the head of his staff. Just before the group slammed into the courtyard, Lucas’ spell finally completed.

A massive gust of air shot forward, crashing into the ground and cracking several of the cobblestones. The force of the blast mercifully slowed the group’s fall, changing their headlong rush toward death into merely a bone-rattling fall. Riley hit the ground and rolled forward, her *Dodge* and *Dexterity* once again assisting her to avoid most of the damage.

“Damn it, that hurt,” Ethan muttered a moment later, slowly pushing himself back to his feet. Riley could see that the group’s health had dipped significantly from the fall.

Riley gave the light mage a hand up, noting the appreciative look in her eye. “Emma, can you get us healed back up please?” she asked.

“Of course,” Emma replied, white light already beginning to glow around her staff. She moved over to Lucas where he sat on the ground in a daze, one hand cradling his arm while his weapon lay on the ground beside him.

Riley’s gaze turned back to the library behind her. They were now standing in the courtyard near the entrance to the building, raindrops splattering against her hood as blocks of stone and debris crashed down around her; the result of the second explosion. She could see that a massive hole had been carved in the top of the building several stories up, smoke still drifting through their makeshift escape route.

“Ugh, this isn’t going to go over well,” Cecil muttered, checking his bags as he glanced up at the library with a worried expression.

“Especially since we ended up empty-handed,” Marie added, walking up beside Riley.

At that comment, Riley turned, finding that Clarence had regained his feet. He was looking around himself with his usual unperturbed calm.

How had the young librarian known about the register for the low-street children? Why was he up in the middle of the night? He also conveniently knew where the undead specimen was being kept. On top of everything else, she had been able to disable him immediately when she encountered him in the dining hall. Weren’t the librarians supposed to be trained warriors?

“Perhaps not,” Riley said softly.

Before anyone could react, Riley rushed the librarian, grabbing him by the collar and shoving the measuring crystal against his forehead. She held her breath for a moment as the crystal maintained its usual dull appearance. Then colors began to swim through the crystalline matrix – a swirling multihued vortex that glowed with a bright intensity.

Clarence shoved Riley back, his lips curling in a menacing scowl as the group looked on in shock. “Stupid, girl,” he growled. He backed away from the group slowly toward the entrance to the library.

“You aren’t going to escape, Clarence. Assuming that is even your name,” Riley said, the icy chill of her mana throbbing through her skull. She had been right.

The man laughed – a cruel, hateful sound coming from the usually courteous young librarian. “Escape? I’m not the one that destroyed the library.” He glanced at Melissa and Marie. “All at the hands of a band of thieves and murders that infiltrated this city – *and* a member of the ruling council of the Twilight Throne,” he added locking eyes with Riley.

“The librarians?” Marie muttered under her breath. “How did we not see that?”

“They hid it well,” Riley said. “I suspect the cultists killed several librarians and then assumed their appearance. This would have allowed them to bypass whatever admittance test that they give to the new recruits. From there, they would have had access to all of the libraries’ facilities.”

Clarence smirked at her. “So, you finally figured it out. It certainly took you long enough. Unfortunately, you’re too late. The plague is already spreading through the city, and we will be there to harvest the mana from the fallen.”

The brown-robed man’s eyes took on a manic appearance. “I know who you are, girl. Your little band destroyed our coven north of the Twilight Throne. Stealing people from their homes and sending them north was no longer an option. We needed to try something more ambitious. We will bring a new god to this world – one that affects it directly instead of hiding in the shadows. We will become his army!”

Cecil glanced back and forth between the crystal that Riley still clutched in her hand and Clarence. “I’m such an idiot,” he muttered, before glancing at Riley. “I had been wondering how someone could sustain this plague. If it was created, then it would have required a massive store of mana to keep it going. Yet if they have control of the library, that means they also have access to its mana crystals...”

Clarence’s eyes widened slightly – a fact that Riley didn’t miss. “It’s true, isn’t it? If so, then that means we may be able to stop your plague. You are also living proof of the cultists’ presence in the city as

long as we have one of these crystals,” Riley said, brandishing the instrument in her hand. “We may be a group of murderers and thieves, but I still think that the City Council will listen to us if we hand you over to them.” She took a step forward, grabbing the bow from her back.

The librarian’s expression darkened, his eyes glancing around the courtyard wildly as he backed toward the stairs to the library. “I can’t let you! Nothing can get in the way of the coming tide.” He scratched at his arm agitatedly and began to mutter to himself.

Then he looked up at them as though seeing them for the first time. “I have to stop you. Yes! I’ll stop you – crush you and destroy the evidence. I will be a sacrifice to his majesty.”

He pulled something from beneath his robes, swinging it high into the air. Riley saw a syringe filled with a glowing multicolored substance. In one swift motion, the cultist pulled back the arm of his robe and plunged the syringe into his flesh, slamming down on the plunger.

“Stop you... I’ll stop you all! No one can prevent its coming,” Clarence’s voice began to thicken and grow deeper. He let out a brief scream mixed with a strangled, manic laugh as he hunched over on the steps. “I will crush you...”

Then his robes tore apart, his skin rippling and contorting. Huge bulbous masses grew on his back and arms, expanding so rapidly that they stretched and split his skin. Clarence let out a tortured scream that echoed through the courtyard and drowned out the muted sound of the library’s alarms and the roar of the rain hitting the cobblestones.

Clarence’s body tripled in size before their eyes, his arms, legs, and torso thickening. Huge veins appeared along his skin, glowing with a rainbow of energy. Dozens of tendrils grew from his shoulders and back, long spindly growths of flesh topped with razor-sharp crystals that dug along the cobblestones of the courtyard. Meanwhile, thick crystals formed along the former librarian’s chest and shoulders, creating a glowing armor.

“What is this?” Ethan muttered as the group backed away.

Riley quickly inspected the creature, the notice revealing little information.

### Mana Abomination – Level ???

Skulls were located near the creature’s name, as though it wasn’t already apparent that this was a boss-level creature. Riley’s gaze

moved back to her group even as she nocked an arrow. “Ethan, guard the casters and Cecil. Marie and Melissa can take point on this one, and I’ll provide ranged support.”

The burly warrior nodded, hoisting his shield. His skin turned a dark gray as he activated *Stone Skin*. Lucas and Emma moved behind him, their staves held at the ready. The light mage immediately began casting her support spells, a shimmer of white energy falling over the group and her protection against evil spell illuminating the monster in front of them. Meanwhile, long daggers appeared in the hands of both Melissa and Marie as they slowly approached the massive creature from each side.

Clarence finally straightened. Pulling himself to his feet, he looked down at the group with glowing multihued eyes. His grotesque mouth gaped open, revealing jagged, uneven teeth. “You have no chance against me,” he rumbled, his voice coming out in a tortured, harsh tone.

“We’ll see about that,” Melissa replied coolly, her eyes filled with deadly intent. Then she rushed forward at lightning speed. The tendrils on the creature’s back and shoulders lashed out, rapidly extending several meters. The rogue nimbly dodged out of the way, and the tentacles crashed against the courtyard, splitting the rock and throwing up a thick cloud of dust.

“We are legion and serve a greater master!” the Clarence-creature cried. Then the air was filled with its tentacles, the tendrils growing and expanding as they raced toward Melissa and Marie. The older woman dodged an incoming blow with a quick sidestep. Her blade lashed out, slicing through the tendril. Sickly glowing blood dripped from the tip. Riley could see that the tentacle was immediately beginning to reform.

“He’s regenerating!” she shouted over the crash of the tentacles slamming against the ground and Clarence’s mad laughter. Marie and Melissa were barely able to approach the monster, his body recovering faster than they could destroy it.

They danced, spun, and dodged in a blur of motion – moving faster than Riley thought possible as they severed tendrils with wild abandon. Yet it was futile. They weren’t able to move any closer to the beast, and he was slowing pushing them back.

Then Marie gave a frustrated shout and retreated a few steps away. Her eyes turned a void-like obsidian riddled with specks of red. A bloody mist began pouring from her skin, collecting around the woman in a dense cloud. The droplets slowly condensed, forming several crimson doppelgangers, blood-red daggers held in their hands. “A Fury?” the creature cackled as it watched the older woman. “I never thought I would see one myself. You will be a fitting sacrifice to

our new lord!”

A dozen tentacles raced toward Marie and her new blood army. Yet her doppelgangers made short work of the tendrils, moving with blinding speed as they sliced through the appendages in a frenzy. Meanwhile, Cecil threw vials at the monster. The glass shattered against the mass of tentacles, showering them with some caustic substance that ate through the creature’s flesh even as Lucas released bolt after bolt of electric energy at the monster.

Working together, the group began to carve a hole in the creature’s defenses, destroying the tendrils faster than it could create them. Melissa took advantage of the opening and raced forward into melee range. At the same time, Riley summoned and released a *Void Arrow*; the bolt of dark energy raced toward the monster’s head. The impact staggered it, throwing it off balance for a moment.

Melissa didn’t relent, jumping into the air and swinging around the creature’s body even as she rammed her blades into the base of its neck. A thick stream of multicolored blood jetted from the wound, staining the cobblestones. With a massive roar, the creature raised its arms into the air and then slammed them down.

The blow threw up a thick cloud of dust, obliterating the ground beneath the monster. A ripple of debris and kinetic energy raced out from the point of impact, immediately disintegrating Marie’s blood creatures. Melissa was thrown back – her body slamming into one of the columns of the library with a sickening crunch. The rogue fell to the ground unmoving.

Still, Clarence didn’t relent. He changed tactics and went on the offensive. The muscles in his bulbous legs bulged, and he launched into the air. Landing in the middle of Ethan’s formation, the force of the impact sent out another shockwave of energy that threw the players off balance. The creature’s crystal-tipped tendrils raced forward, penetrating the bodies of Lucas and Emma. Blood soon stained their robes as their health rapidly depleted.

Another group of tendrils slammed into Ethan, the warrior barely able to get his shield up in time. The blow shattered his shield, fragments of metal shrapnel chipping his stone body. The force of the strike threw him across the courtyard.

Cecil fared little better. The enchanter managed to throw a vial just before a tendril struck, creating a foam-like substance that muted the impact. However, the blow still sent him flying.

And then only Riley and Marie remained. Their team lay upon the ground around them. Feeling numb, Riley could see that Emma and Lucas were already dead, and Ethan would likely soon follow. Cecil and Melissa were completely unmoving. Clarence turned to face Riley, ignoring the older woman as she struggled to regain her

footing.

His mad eyes bore into Riley. "You see this, girl? This is true power." He took a lumbering step forward, his feet cracking the cobblestones beneath him. "The strength to crush your enemies. The ability to level cities. With this power, we will rule under *his* hand!" He let out another hoarse cackle.

Riley just stood there in shock. How could they hope to beat this monster? Even her dark mana was not enough to push back the growing despair in her chest. She wasn't strong enough to fight this thing.

"But you won't see our master come to this world," Clarence continued. "I'll make certain of that." His tendrils raced forward toward Riley, a dozen crystalline tips glimmering in the lights cast by the lanterns ringing the courtyard. She witnessed her own death looming before her.

Riley saw a blur of motion out of the corner of her eye and heard a wet impact, but no pain lanced her body. As she looked up, she saw Marie standing in front of her, the woman's daggers raised defensively. She had managed to block a few tendrils, but that hadn't been enough. Nearly half a dozen tentacles had pierced her armor, and blood ran freely down the leather.

As Clarence retracted his tendrils, Marie staggered and almost fell, her legs no longer able to support her. Even with her heightened reflexes, Riley barely caught her before she hit the ground, easing her fall. The older woman soon lay on the ground, looking up at her.

"I'm sorry," Marie whispered.

She coughed harshly, blood bubbling at her lips. "So sorry... Lily."

"What? What are you talking about?" Riley asked, watching the life fade from her eyes. Marie never got a chance to answer as she fell limp and her eyes clouded over, staring into the distance. A glance at her combat log confirmed that the woman had died.

Riley just stared at Marie's body and at the blood covering her hands. No epic music played, nor was there any sudden resurrection. The woman was dead – completely. She knew from her experience with Rex that the NPCs of this world did not come back.

As Riley looked at the dead woman, helpless rage boiled in her chest. It was supposed to be different here. In this game, she was supposed to feel in control – to feel powerful. Yet she hadn't been able to complete this quest. She hadn't been able to do anything to help her teammates. She just felt helpless. She felt that same sense of crushing defeat she had experienced at the hands of Alex – at the torment from her classmates.

She could feel the rage and despair curl and coil within her chest,

overwhelming the frigid mana in her veins. Riley looked up at the horrifying creature, its face leering at her – mocking her. For the first time in a long time, her dark mana faded. She was left feeling only her own angry rage as it pounded through her veins – an intense hatred for the creature and what it represented.

Before she could stop herself, Riley rushed at the beast, a piercing scream erupting from her throat. She had no plan. She had no goal. She just poured every ounce of frustration and rage into that scream as she barreled toward the massive creature.

She never saw the tendrils coming. Over a dozen crystalline tips penetrated her armor simultaneously, lifting her body off the ground and suspending her in the air. As her health depleted and finally hit zero, she looked into the creature's crazed eyes.

“Fuck you,” she said, blood staining her lips.  
Then Riley died.

### **System Message**

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!



## Chapter 26 - Furious

Riley opened her eyes a moment later, noticing motes of translucent blue energy drifting through the air around her like ephemeral snowflakes. She was standing in the same courtyard outside of the library, raindrops splattering against the cobblestones as her group squared off for the second time against Clarence.

She watched the brown-robed librarian go through his evil monologue once more, his eyes wild with madness. Again, his body transformed into the same gruesome, bulbous creature. She couldn't look away as she watched her teammates being torn down around her. However, it was watching Marie die in her arms and her own thin form rush at the hulking beast that caused her to slide to the ground, cradling her knees with her arms.

It didn't matter how far she had come. She had struck back at Alex, she had fought alongside Jason and Frank, and she had made it to the end of this quest. But it just wasn't enough; it was *never* enough.

She didn't want to admit that some part of the rage she had felt only a moment ago was directed at herself. She hated Alex. She hated those girls. And she sure as hell hated that grotesque abomination that still leered at her in the courtyard. But what she really hated was that she was too weak to do anything about it – too weak to fight back.

"We all feel that way at times," a voice said from behind Riley. She started as a hand gently rested on her shoulder and scrambled to her feet. Riley turned and found a ghostly figure standing behind her, gazing at her with a compassionate expression. The girl was semi-translucent, her skin glowing softly. She was robed in a vaguely familiar outfit; patches of red fabric were embroidered on her worn leather armor.

"Who are you?" Riley asked in confusion.

"I expect you know me. You carry my bow after all." She gestured to the weapon slung across Riley's shoulder. "My name is Lily," she said calmly, her mouth curling into a sad smile.

Riley's mind wheeled in confusion. "But why are you here? I don't understand. Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"Of course. I died in that awful labyrinth you conquered in the north, but, in my last moments, I did something stupid. I imbued a part of my soul into the bow you carry." The girl seemed a bit embarrassed, not quite able to look Riley in the eye.

Then Lily glanced up at her, tilting her head. "That is how you came to receive this quest. I offered you a chance to pick up where I left off,

and I have been watching you closely ever since. You have made it so much further than I did on my own...,” the girl trailed off as her gaze shifted to the hulking abomination in the courtyard.

“So why can I see you now?” Riley asked.

“Because you died,” Lily replied simply. “See?” She motioned to the courtyard where Marie once again dove in front of Riley and then she began her headlong rush toward the creature. She was painfully aware of how that had ended.

Lily’s eyes locked on Marie. “Even in her last moments, she tried to help me. I didn’t deserve her...”

“You mean Marie?” Riley watched the ghostly girl carefully.

“Yes.” Lily glanced at her, hesitating. “The real story is rather long, but I suppose we have some time, don’t we?” she added with a morose chuckle, looking at the death-scape surrounding them. “Marie only told you a small piece of my tale. She neatly glossed over what happened when my real family disappeared.”

Lily hesitated for a moment before continuing, “I was lost for so long. I had evidence that something had happened. My family hadn’t just abandoned me as the city watch said. Our home was torn apart, and I found blood stains on the walls – not that they listened to me or bothered to check. We were low-born street rats after all. Our people go missing all the time. So, I did what everyone in the low streets does when the mages ignore them. I went to the gangs.”

Lily settled on the steps of the library as she told her story, her eyes misting over. “It took me a while, but I eventually met a thief who actually heard me out. He did more than listen; he took me under his wing. Together we searched for clues to what had happened to my parents.” She glared with poorly-concealed hatred at Clarence as he restarted his mad monologue for the third time.

“We discovered the cultists were stealing people from the mage city – those with a high natural affinity for the elements. They would then send them north to that dungeon you found – food for their fledgling god.”

“Was the thief’s name Jerry?” Riley asked as she slowly began to pull together the threads of the girl’s story. It felt like puzzle pieces were beginning to connect in her head.

Lily nodded. “Yes, of course. Jerry was... Well, he was an interesting man. We found some evidence of the cult operating in the city, but I wasn’t strong enough to do anything about it.” She shook her head. “I was just a silly girl who liked enchanting. Then Lily’s expression hardened. “I knew I needed to grow stronger if I wanted to accomplish my goal – if I wanted to avenge my parents.”

“What did you do?” Riley prompted as the girl drifted into silence.

She looked up at Riley. "I went to Marie. Even back then people knew she was much more than the matron of an orphanage. I had heard the rumors since I was a young girl. A killer. A legendary assassin..."

Lily rose to her feet, pacing the library's steps. "Marie was something special. She had real power – the type of power that would allow me to fight back and take vengeance on the cultists who had harmed my family."

Her hands clenched into fists as her eyes turned a dark obsidian. Then her gaze rested on Riley. "She was reluctant at first, but I insisted that she help me – train me. When she saw that I wouldn't give up or relent, she finally gave in, and she showed me what it meant to be a *Fury*."

Riley's eyes widened in surprise. Suddenly she began to understand Marie's guilt and her last whispered message asking for forgiveness. She had also heard Clarence – or the creature that had once been Clarence – use that word when he had observed Marie fighting and the blood mist that she had manipulated.

"After Marie provided me the training I needed, I went hunting," Lily continued. "I couldn't figure out where the cultists were hiding within the city, but I managed to follow one of them north."

Riley nodded, her eyes clouded as more parts of the story fell into place. "Marie mentioned you had disappeared and that a local thief also vanished around the same time." She looked up at the ghostly girl. "Which must mean that Jerry followed you..."

She sighed. "I was arrogant. It's so easy to see that now. I wasn't ready for what awaited me in the dungeon, and I was blinded by my anger. Jerry was too late to save me. I think he eventually tracked me to the cultists' lair, but, despite his own abilities, he couldn't take on an entire coven by himself." She glanced up at Riley, biting her lip and her mana fading slightly. "Is he... is he okay?"

"He's fine. I mean it's hard to tell with Jerry, but I guess he's happy."

"Yes, he always was the joking sort," Lily said, her eyes on the ground. She snorted softly. "A natural-born comedian if he hadn't been born with a lock pick in his hand."

"There's still one piece I don't understand," Riley began tentatively. "What is a Fury? The creature used that word too when he saw the blood creatures that Marie summoned."

Lily's dark eyes focused on Riley, her mana flaring again. "Some of the other mages that still know we exist refer to us as 'Erinyes.' They call us ghosts or demons." She laughed, the sound coming out harsher than Riley expected as the girl approached slowly. "These are only silly rumors. The truth is that we are so much more."

"We are a group of women devoted to a singular purpose. We have

been gifted by The Dark One himself with the ability to control our own blood. With this weapon, we channel the desire for vengeance and become its living incarnation in this world. We are pure wrath – untamed and wild.”

Lily’s fists clenched and her eyes bored into Riley. “And that leads me to the purpose of our meeting. When you touched my bow, I sensed the same struggle inside of you that I felt so many years ago. You were deeply wronged. You yearn to fight back and lash out at those that have harmed you and the people you care for.

“I have watched you for some time now, sitting by your side as you pursued my quest. You fight to avenge others – to free your people. You fight to protect your friends. I also witnessed your last attack on the abomination. Your rage and hate – your desire for *revenge*. You have already begun to take the first steps along the path.

At Lily’s words, Riley’s thoughts turned back to her battle with the fire guild Prefect. Suddenly, the way her bow had responded during the fight began to make sense. She recalled how her health had dipped and powered her last attack. Lily had been watching her even back then.

The girl took a step closer, raising a ghostly hand and resting it on Riley’s cheek. “You asked me before why I’m here,” she continued. “I have been permitted by The Dark One himself to offer you a place among us. I have been given permission to make you a Fury.”

Riley stared at the girl before her, seeing the thinly-concealed rage behind her gaze and feeling the intense power rippling through the ephemeral hand that rested against her cheek. Her dark mana responded automatically, flooding her veins with its chill power and washing away her uncertainty and hesitation. She opened her mouth to answer the ghostly girl – to accept her offer.

“No,” Lily said, pressing her hand to Riley’s forehead. In an instant, her dark mana vanished. “You must make this decision with a clear mind. The path we walk is harsh and riddled with pain. Marie was not wrong to deter me from this life. You can witness for yourself the effects of my arrogance, and how my rage clouded my judgment.” The girl gestured at her translucent body. “But you must make this decision now with sound mind and body.”

Riley stared at her, uncertainty clouding her thoughts. Lily was offering her exactly what she wanted. Something in the depths of her soul screamed for her to accept, yet she felt that this offer might come with a hidden catch. She couldn’t shake the image of the intense guilt she had seen on Marie’s face or her story in the sewers. What had she done before becoming a matron of that orphanage? Were her sins limited to Lily?

Then Riley heard a shout behind her, and she turned. She

watched again as her friends were slain and the abomination's tentacles pierced Marie's body. She saw the pain and fear on their faces. In her mind's eye, she also saw the faces of Alex and Carrie, taunting her weakness and laughing at her pain. The message was clear. If she was going to get stronger and if she was going to protect the people she cared about, she had to take a risk – regardless of the consequences.

"I... I accept," Riley whispered.

"I didn't hear you," Lily said in a teasing tone, cocking her head.

"I accept," Riley said more clearly, raising her eyes to meet the gaze of the ghost girl.

"I want to become a Fury."

"Now that's more like it!" Lily replied, clapping her hands.

At the sound, the ground began to crack and crumble around Riley. Thin emerald vines sprouted through the ruptures in the stone, swiftly growing and thickening. Before she could react, the tendrils had wound around Riley's legs and coiled up her body, lifting her several feet into the air. Her body tilted so that she was lying flat as jagged thorns began to grow along the vines, digging into her armor and skin but not quite drawing blood. Within less than a minute, Riley was fully suspended by the thorny plants.

"This is the initiation of a sister," Lily intoned, her voice echoing through the courtyard. Riley strained to look at the girl but found she couldn't move, her gaze fixed on the darkness that loomed above the disk.

"A new initiate," other ghostly voices whispered around her.

"Born of death..." the voices continued in hushed tones. It sounded as though Riley were surrounded by dozens of women, but she still couldn't see anyone.

Lily's voice hushed the others. "This new soul has accepted the rite, and as one we bind her to service – to the pursuit of vengeance. From this day forth she shall never waver and never balk.

"Do you accept, Riley? Do you agree to join our sisterhood?"

"I do," Riley declared loudly.

"Then you are now a Fury!"

At this final word, the thorns around Riley suddenly stabbed into her skin simultaneously. Her blood ran freely down the vines, staining the green tendrils crimson. At the same time, raw power flooded her veins and raged through her body in a torrent so strong that Riley struggled not to scream. It felt like her entire body was on fire, and her blood was boiling. The feeling swiftly began to overwhelm her senses, her vision blurring as she gasped for breath and fought to stay conscious.

Then, in an instant, the pain was gone. Riley was still laying on the bed of thorns, her chest heaving as her mind attempted to process what had happened. She tilted her head to the side and found herself staring at a rose in full bloom, its petals stirring in some unknown breeze. Yet it wasn't alone. Dozens of roses had bloomed all around her, their petals a crimson, blood-red.

"Welcome, sister," Lily said, even as the vines shifted and lifted Riley to her feet. The girl came into view again, her expression triumphant. The ghostly afterimages of dozens of women stood behind and beside her – their faces indistinct and shifting. They whispered welcome to a new sister.

Then Marie approached through the throng, resting a hand on Lily's shoulder. The pair watched Riley with a steely gaze. "You are being given one more chance. A gift from the sisterhood. Use it well. May you succeed where we failed..." they declared simultaneously, their voices intertwining and cascading through the courtyard even as their bodies disappeared from view.

And then Riley was standing alone. Before she had a chance to fully process what had happened, a series of notifications crashed into her vision.

### **Hidden Class Change: Fury (Erinyes)**

You have been confronted by the ghost of Lily who has offered you the power that your soul craves. She has given you your first taste of the Path of Blood. You will become the ghost in the darkness, the symbol of vengeance for the powerless and the downtrodden, and your enemies will fear your coming. For you are a Fury.

Previous class bonuses removed

+ 50 Vitality

+ 25 Strength

+ 25 Dexterity

Mana removed and added to health.

Health gain from vitality increased by x1.25.

All spells now cost health to cast.

### **New Spell: Marked for Death**

This skill allows you to mark an enemy, causing them to take increased damage. The mark lasts until the target is slain. You cannot mark a new target until the previous target is defeated.

**Skill Level:** Beginner Level 1

**Effect:** Marked enemies take 5% additional damage from the Fury.

**Cost:** 10 Health / Second.

### **New Spell: Health Drain**

You may drain the health from a single target. This spell does not require contact with the target and can be cast at a distance. May only be applied to a single target at a time.

**Skill Level:** Beginner Level 1

**Effect:** Drains 5 Health / Second for 15 seconds.

### **New Spell: Blood Transfer**

You may siphon your health to another creature. This spell does not require contact with the target and can be cast at a distance. May only be applied to a single target. This spell must be channeled.

**Skill Level:** Beginner Level 1

**Effect:** Heals target for 10 Health / Second.

**Cost:** 50 Health / Second.

Riley struggled to keep up with the barrage of notifications. Already, she could tell that she was no longer merely an archer. It appeared that she was now an entirely health-based character. She expected that she would need to continually use *Health Drain* and *Blood Mist* to keep casting her spells.

Before she could fully consider the effects of her class change, Riley felt her skin begin to tingle. She whirled, noticing that the world around her was beginning to deteriorate – slowly fading to black.

“What is this?” she muttered. She heard a roar and turned to find the abomination’s tentacles piercing her body and lifting her limp form into the air yet again. She witnessed the blood pouring from the gaping holes in her body and armor as her obsidian eyes glared at the creature. Riley watched the scene – rage boiling in her veins.

“This is another chance,” Lily’s voice echoed in her mind. “A chance to avenge a fallen sister and the first test of many along your new path. Do not squander it.” Then the world fully faded to black.

# Chapter 27 - Avenged

Riley drifted weightlessly in an endless black void, her eyes searching the darkness. She wasn't certain what was happening or where she would end up next. Her mind still reeled in confusion from her encounter with Lily. Suddenly, a single blue notice appeared before her, glowing brightly in the enveloping darkness.

## System Notice

A Fury came to your aid in her last moments and has fallen in battle. In recognition of this act, you have been granted "Hell Hath No Fury" – allowing you to channel the true incarnation of vengeance for a limited time. For two minutes after you respawn, you will be granted a 500% increase to damage, a 500% bonus to your base statistics, and a 500% increase to your total health pool.

*Use this wisely sister. I will be watching. – The Dark One*

The system notice abruptly disintegrated into a whirlwind of blue energy before slowly reforming into a glowing number "10." It then began counting down toward zero. Riley struggled to understand everything that was happening. She expected that she was being sent back to the courtyard with a new class and additional power. That meant she would only have two minutes to defeat the creature in the courtyard.

Her eyes pulsed with dark mana and her fists clenched as she watched the number shift. "2." This was her last chance, and she was going to make that monster pay for hurting her friends – for killing Marie. The counter shifted once more. "1." She could feel a stream of unfiltered power rage through her body and threaten to overwhelm her. "0."

Riley was back in the courtyard, her body suspended above the cobblestones by the creature's tentacles as its manic laughter peeled through the air. She didn't hesitate. Her daggers immediately appeared in her hands and tore through the tentacles embedded in her skin. Multihued blood sprayed in every direction, and she abruptly dropped to the ground, landing in a crouch.



“What is this?” the Clarence-creature asked, eyeing her curiously. “You survived?”

As Riley focused on the beast, her rage honed to a fine point. She was unaware of the red streaks that now dotted her black irises or of the droplets of blood that were collecting along her unbroken skin. A fine crimson vapor began to spin around her, eddies and swirls of energy drifting through the mist.

Riley launched forward toward the creature, simultaneously casting both *Marked for Death* and *Health Drain*. In an instant, she was standing in front of the monster. She didn’t try to slice him with her blades. Instead, she grabbed arrow after arrow from her quiver, slamming the wooden shafts deep into the monster’s flesh as she continuously cast *Blood Mist*. She didn’t even try to avoid the tentacles that pierced her skin and body, blood pouring down her armor and staining the street as her health plummeted.

Soon a veritable whirlwind of blood spun in the center of the courtyard. Riley and the creature stood in the eye of the storm facing each other. Clarence cackled at her, “Another Fury? What a surprise. Do you think this will stop me?” It gestured at the cloud of blood and the arrows in its skin with its claws. “These pretty tricks won’t help you. You will fail just as the other did.”

Riley didn’t bother to respond. She stepped toward the creature slowly, her daggers reappearing in her hands, and the tips pointed at the ground. Bloody vapor collected along the cool metal, dripping slowly from the edge of each weapon. Clarence lashed forward, slicing through her shoulder with his claws and nearly severing her arm. Yet even as the beast struck her, the limb knitted itself back together almost instantly. Her health refilled at an alarming rate under the effects of her spells.

“What is this?” Clarence cried, his voice becoming frantic. He began lashing at her with all of his tentacles, pounding her body and blood spraying from the impacts. Riley ignored the muted pain that ravaged her body as she continued her slow march forward. She knew that the beast would repair itself if she used normal attacks. Wailing on it wasn’t enough, but it had to have a weakness.

How was the creature repairing itself? Her eyes focused on the crystals embedded in Clarence’s chest and shoulders. Cecil’s explanations echoed through her mind even as the image of the glowing syringe flashed in her mind’s eye. Crystals were used to store mana, weren’t they? Was it using mana to heal itself like the paper golems?

Riley suddenly dashed forward without warning, throwing Clarence off balance. Her blade sank into one of the crystals embedded in the creature’s chest before he could react, shattering the material. Multicolored energy spun and danced through the air as Clarence

waited in pain. After a few seconds, Riley saw that the flesh around the crystal didn't repair itself. A malevolent grin swept across her bloodied face.

She knew his weak point now.

With this new knowledge, she began her dance of death, spinning and twirling around the creature like he was one of the wooden practice dummies in Jerry's training room. Her body moved at a breathtaking speed. Tendrils whipped past her head and missed her body by inches. She pivoted on her heel to avoid a triple strike and dashed forward, sinking her blades into yet another crystal. She struck again and again, her movements causing the blood mist to swirl around her.

Then she stepped away. The creature that was once Clarence had sunk to its knees, its chest heaving. Fragmented crystals littered his body, and its technicolor blood stained the ground beneath it.

"This isn't possible," the creature growled. "How can you do this?"

Riley backed away and pulled her bow from her back, the crimson crystals along the grip glowing fiercely and pulsing in time with her heartbeat. She nocked an arrow and drew back on the string, pointing the weapon at the creature. A notice appeared in the side of her vision, informing her that the weapon's primary ability had been unlocked. A grim smile curled her lips.

"This is possible because I follow a true god," she said softly, her voice echoing with the power that still surged through her veins. "The Dark One sends his regards."

And then Riley began pouring energy into her bow. She gave it all of her hate, her anger, and her rage. She fed it Marie's death. Alex's torment. The pain and embarrassment she had felt at Carrie's hand. She gave it her despair and her yearning and tasked it with a single purpose.

Revenge.

The bow sucked up the blood mist around Riley. The vapor spiraled in on the arrow tip and formed an enormous ball of glowing red and black energy. At the same time, the power seemed to drain her life force, and her health plummeted faster than her regeneration could handle. The power collected and condensed until the arrow dipped and swayed under the force, all the energy pointed dead center on Clarence. It collected until the ground around Riley began to deteriorate under the pressure and her health redlined.

Then, with a strangled scream of relief and rage, Riley let it all go.

Time seemed to slow for a moment, whether a product of her skills or some effect of the buff she wasn't certain. She saw the creature's eyes gradually widen as the massive orb edged forward, and

the energy ripped a furrow in the cobblestone courtyard, throwing fragments of stone and dust into the air. The monster roared its defiance. She watched as the bolt finally crashed into Clarence. His body was torn apart. His skin, flesh, muscle, and bone disintegrated in layers as his screams echoed through the courtyard. The sound seemed muted and surreal.

Then the ball of mana exploded in a massive blast, throwing Riley backward. The explosion tore a crater in the ground, sending out a shockwave that rocked the nearby buildings around the library and caused more than one column to come crumbling down. Dust and debris drifted through the courtyard, as the rain slowly washed away the blood that stained the ground.

Riley struggled to pull herself to her feet. She stood alone in the courtyard and watched as the last second lapsed on her buff. As soon as the effect faded, she was immediately overcome by intense exhaustion, dropping to her knees as red notifications flashed in her vision. Her gaze, however, was fixed on the library. She was unable to look away even as she heard the pounding of feet. The cries of the mages approaching behind her were matched by the angry noises of the brown-robed men and women piling out of the library's entrance.

A moment later, she heard the footsteps behind her slow, and the librarians turned in confusion to look at the front of the library, following her gaze. She could see red-robed men and women standing beside her in her peripheral vision. Everyone's attention was fixed on one of the columns of the Great Library. The symbol for dark mana that had once been scorched and scarred now glowed with an unholy light.

Thunder pealed through the roiling mass of black clouds that hovered above the city. Even as the group watched, words written in blood appeared in the air above the massive building as though traced by an invisible hand. The words were visible to everyone on the disc.

*Have you so quickly forgotten me? I am the darkness that binds this world. The whisper from the depths of your soul that you all seek to ignore and suppress. I am Desire incarnate. Bear witness to my power. – The Dark One.*

## Chapter 28 - Judged

Riley and her teammates stood in an antechamber in front of a broad set of wooden double doors. They had been told that the crystal-studded cuffs restraining their hands would explode if they tried to break free. Nearly twenty fire mages surrounded them, clutching at their staves and wands as they watched their prisoners warily.

Her gaze moved to her teammates. She estimated that at least half a day had passed since their encounter with Clarence – if that was even his real name. Yet their clothes were still ripped and torn, with blood staining mail, cloth, and leather. At least most of them were still alive. Ethan had managed to survive his encounter with the enhanced Clarence – his *Stone Skin* barely shielding him from the attack. Lucas and Emma had respawned nearly thirty minutes after Riley defeated the creature. The fire mages had found Cecil and Melissa under piles of rubble, both bruised and bleeding but still breathing.

It turned out that the only member of their group who had died was Marie.

The memory of the older woman sacrificing herself still made Riley wince, but she had been sure to explain to the group that she had evened the score. Their stony expressions had softened when they had witnessed the enormous crater that now stood in the courtyard of the once Great Library and the blood-drenched cobblestones.

The door creaked open, and a red-robed mage spoke in hushed tones with one of their guards.

“I think it’s show time,” Melissa said, rolling her shoulders. “I for one am excited. I haven’t been in the shiny new council room since they updated the upholstery...”

Instead of responding, one of the fire mages forcefully stabbed the rogue in the back with his staff, maneuvering her toward the door. “Watch where you’re poking that thing, buddy,” she snapped before glancing at Riley. “Men, am I right?”

“Don’t antagonize them, Melissa,” Cecil grumbled from behind her as the guards shuffled each member through the door one at a time. “This is going to be bad enough as it is.”

As the last of her teammates stepped through the door, a guard moved to nudge Riley forward. Another mage stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, slowly shaking his head. He whispered to the other guard, “Don’t touch that one...” Riley missed the last part of his warning, but she saw the man’s eyes widen in alarm.

“Will you please step this way,” the fire mage said politely,

keeping his distance. She didn't miss the trace of fear in his eyes.

Riley didn't bother to respond, walking slowly into the room at the back of the group. They had made special preparations for her, leaving a full ten fire mages to escort her through the doorway. The men and women were tense, keeping their eyes on her at all times and their weapons held at the ready.

*They really must be afraid of me. Not that I blame them...* The image of The Dark One's message was still burned into her mind's eye.

As she stepped through the portal, Riley found herself in a massive circular chamber. The ceiling towered above her, composed of hundreds of panels of multicolored glass that filtered the bright sunlight outside. The ceiling shifted as she watched, constantly changing the pattern of the tiles in a way that created colorful designs across the floor of the room. Riley idly considered that the chamber would be beautiful if it weren't being used to hold her trial.

She approached her teammates where they knelt in the center of the room. "Kneel," one of her guards whispered. She glanced sharply at the man, and he flinched back, his grip tightening on his staff. "Please," he added quickly.

Riley dropped to her knees, the fire mages quickly encircling the group. As she fell to the ground, the back wall of the room shimmered and disappeared, revealing five floating platforms. Riley immediately caught onto the obvious color choices. Each council member sat upon a crystalline throne colored after their respective guild. The various men and women eyed the prisoners with hard expressions.

A man robed all in white sat in the center of the group and spoke up first, "We hereby convene the trial of citizens Cecil Stone and Melissa Granger and the travelers Riley, Ethan, Lucas, and Emma. The full Council is present and will stand in judgment of the prisoners. My name is Titus Augustus, acting Chairman of the Council and light mage Master."

He eyed the group kneeling before him, hesitating before he continued. "Due to the numerous counts against each prisoner, the crimes charged against them will be summarized. The prisoners are being held on two counts of criminal trespass, five counts of arson, three counts of damage to public property, six counts of endangerment to the city and its citizens, and innumerable charges of battery, assault, criminal conspiracy, and treason.

"They are responsible for the destruction of the dormitories within the Great Library, damage to the stacks themselves, and critical damage to the library's exterior wards and courtyard. We also have reason to believe that the prisoners conspired to destroy the tubing on level eleven and assault fire mage forces that were rerouted through

level one.” Riley could see the fire mage Master grimace at this last point.

Titus eyed them each in turn. “How do the prisoners plead?”

The group all turned to look at Riley. Their message was clear. They would let her handle this process. “Guilty,” she said, returning the old man’s gaze evenly and her voice echoing slightly in the council room.

Titus turned to his fellow masters. “Very well. What says the Council? All those finding the prisoners guilty raise their hand.” Five hands were lifted into the air, the mages watching the group closely. As Riley scanned the Masters, she was surprised to see Vivian sitting upon the earth throne. The woman cocked her head as she watched Riley and her brow was furrowed in confusion.

“The vote is unanimous. The prisoners are guilty on all counts. We will now proceed to sentencing,” Titus intoned.

Riley rose to her feet, causing the fire mages around her to grab at their weapons in alarm. Fire curled around more than one staff and wand as their eyes flared red with their mana. “Permission to speak,” Riley requested, locking eyes with Titus.

The older man looked offended by her lack of decorum but received nods from the mages beside him as he glanced at his colleagues. “Very well, you may speak. Keep it brief, prisoner.”

Riley couldn’t help but smirk. Melissa might have been having a bad influence on her. “At this point, you are all aware of the magical plague that was spreading through the city. Our group already informed the fire guild patrol of the infiltration of the librarians by a group of cultists responsible for the disease. Have these cultists been found?”

The fire guild Master, a heavysset bearded man, spoke up, “Of course. We tested all of the librarians immediately, and we have already executed the group. Many killed themselves, so it made our work that much easier.” His tone was dismissive.

Vivian interjected, frowning at the other mage. “We were also able to locate the source of the plague. The cultists appear to have harnessed the library’s mana crystals to help sustain and spread the disease. Once we disabled their spell, most of the afflicted began to return to normal.”

Riley nodded in understanding. This next part would be tricky. She took a deep breath, willing herself to be calm. *You can do this*, she told herself.

“Then you also understand that our actions were justified,” Riley began. “This council and the guilds were warned of the danger of the plague before our group infiltrated the library and you all chose to do nothing. No help or assistance was provided to the low streets,

and no investigation of the source of the plague was conducted. In this situation, the damage that we caused was much less than the result if we had not acted.”

“You blew a hole in the Great Library and nearly set fire to the stacks,” the fire mage Master sputtered. “I have over fifty mages in critical condition at the light guild because of what those scum on the lower levels did. Are you saying this was acceptable *collateral damage*?”

Riley patiently ignored both Melissa’s snort of laughter and the irony of being lectured to by a fire mage about collateral damage. “Yes,” she replied calmly, meeting the mage’s angry gaze. “We acted decisively and eliminated the threat.”

“And brought dark magic back to this city,” Titus added. “The message from The Dark One did not go unnoticed by the Council. Dark magic is prohibited within the city limits, as I’m certain you’ve been told. This is just the sort of situation we sought to avoid by exiling the dark guild nearly a hundred years ago.”

“Without my assistance, this city would have fallen to the cultists, resulting in thousands of deaths,” Riley argued. “And quite a bit more property damage – I might add – since you appear to value that more than the lives of your own citizens. I believe you should consider this as you rule on our sentencing.”

Titus’ face contorted briefly in anger before he could control his expression, while the fire mage Master glared at her with open hostility. She suspected the Prefect she had dueled on the road may have soured the well before the council meeting. Yet the other air and water mages were wavering, and she saw a small smile curl Vivian’s lips. Maybe all was not lost.

“Very well, we will take this under advisement during sentencing,” Titus continued. “Give us a moment to confer.” With that, the wall abruptly became opaque, hiding the mages from view. As soon as the wall reappeared, a notification popped up in front of Riley.

### **Quest Completed: Violent Vindication**

Your group discovered that the cultists had infiltrated the Great Library, using the facility’s resources to develop and spread a magical plague. You defeated one of the cultists, and your actions lead to the eradication of the cult in Vaerwald. You believe that this cult may have been responsible for kidnapping townsfolk – including Lily’s family. While you suspect that this may not be the end of the cult’s influence, you have completed the intent of Lily’s quest. For now.

**Difficulty:** A

**Success:** Kill the cultists responsible for the death of Lily's family.

**Failure:** Unknown

**Reward:** Unlock Vendetta's special ability. Hidden class change to Fury.

*As though that wasn't obvious*, Riley thought as she swiped the notice away. Sometimes, it felt like the quest prompts were pointless.

"Well, we're screwed," Ethan said, interrupting her thoughts. Despite their predicament, there was a trace of humor coloring his voice. "Anyone want to take bets on whether we get exiled?"

"We could use my coin, but I'm sort of tied up," Lucas added with a chuckle.

Emma snorted, glancing at Riley with laughter in her eyes. "I would say I told you so, but this proves the point for me. Doesn't it?" Then she hesitated, her expression sobering. "But I am glad I came along."

"Same here," Lucas and Ethan echoed.

"You are a bunch of idiots," Cecil grouched. Then he paused before glancing at Riley. "But I'll be damned if I don't agree. We still won – even if it came at a cost."

Melissa shrugged. "I don't know why you all look so morose. I'm going to be fine. Plus, I've got a hefty amount of coin coming to me after this. No one will be able to say I didn't accomplish the job with a formal Council meeting to give me credit!"

Riley just shook her head at the rogue's response. She was about to say something to the group when the wall shimmered again and disappeared. Titus didn't look happy, and the fire mage Master looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. She took that as a good sign – a very good sign.

"The Council has made a verdict," Titus declared, his voice echoing through the chamber. He paused, eyeing each of the prisoners in turn.

"The travelers Emma, Lucas, and Ethan are hereby exiled from the city for six months, with their sentence abated by five months due to their lack of a prior criminal record and their contributions to the city." Riley could see the group heave a sigh of relief. A month of game time was doable and would pass quickly in the real world. That was only a little over a week.

Titus' gaze turned to Cecil. "Given his previous criminal history and transgressions, Cecil Stone is hereby permanently exiled from



Vaerwald, and his business will be confiscated to help pay for the damage to the city's tube system and library." The little man spat on the floor, glaring at the mage.

"Melissa 'The Fox' Granger..." the light mage hesitated, glancing at his colleagues with a frown. "Melissa is to be released on probation, and no fines or penalties shall be imposed." A shit-eating grin had spread across the rogue's face, and she looked like she wanted to laugh. Riley was surprised. The woman's employers must have some serious connections – assuming they weren't the council members themselves.

"And finally, the Council has reached a verdict regarding the traveler named Riley, The Left Hand of the Twilight Throne, and a founding member of the guild <Original Sin>."

The light mage's gaze hardened and the other mages shuffled in their seats as he paused. "Riley shall be released, but shall be permanently banned from setting foot within Vaerwald from this day forth. Furthermore, if she is found within ten miles of the city, we shall view this as a formal declaration of war by the Twilight Throne and shall respond appropriately."

Riley didn't flinch as they read out the verdict. She didn't plan to re-enter this damnable city. "My weapons will also be returned to me," she said, locking eyes with the light mage. "Including my bow. You will also return Cecil's equipment."

The mage looked like he was about to argue and Riley summoned her dark mana. Crimson lines could be seen spreading away from the center of her pitch-black eyes like vines and the council members shifted in alarm. "Or this will be viewed as an act of hostility against *my* kingdom," she stated coldly.

"How dare you..."

A smile drifted across Vivian's mouth, and she interrupted the light mage. "Titus, you saw that courtyard just as I did. You are also aware of the events that have transpired recently in the Twilight Throne." She looked at him evenly. "Is this an enemy we truly wish to make right now?"

The light mage looked flustered but eventually backed down. "Fine. Fine. It will be done. Guards, see to the prisoners and their belongings. Riley and Cecil, you have three hours to vacate the city. You should hope we never meet again."

With that, the Council dismissed them, and the group was led back into the antechamber. The fire mages disabled their shackles, and then a group went to retrieve their equipment. The red-robed men and women kept their distance from the group of former prisoners.

"Oh, the balls on you, girl!" Melissa said, slapping Riley on the back. "Marie would be proud of her new protégé." Riley glanced at

her in surprise. "I'm well aware of what your eyes mean," the rogue scoffed. "And so are those stuffy old mages."

Riley's expression sobered, thinking of the children at the orphanage. "About Marie..."

Melissa waved a dismissive hand. "Don't worry. You were going to ask about the orphanage, right? The people of the low streets care for their own. We always have. The children will be fine." She looked at her meaningfully and placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Trust me," she said, squeezing once before releasing Riley.

Then the red-haired woman leaned in close. "But in return, why don't you do me a favor? If you see Jerry again, tell him he's a dead man if he comes near this city."

Riley snorted involuntarily. "What's so funny?" Melissa demanded, looking slightly offended that her attempt at intimidation had earned her a laugh.

"It's just that I think someone already beat you to that one," Riley replied with a smile. At the confused look the rogue gave her, she added, "Trust me, it's a long story."

With that, Melissa left the antechamber grumbling under her breath about ungrateful Furies. The fire mages dropped off the confiscated equipment for Emma, Lucas, and Ethan, and, a moment later, the group approached Riley, re-equipping their weapons and armor, and hefting their packs.

"So, what's the plan now?" Ethan asked.

"I'm going home... I mean back to the Twilight Throne," Riley said. "How about you all? Do you want to join me?"

Ethan grimaced. "I think I'm going to pass. Life's a little too intense hanging around you – if you know what I mean."

"What he's trying to say is that there is another city south of Vaerwald with an air and light guild presence," Lucas added, rolling his eyes. "I think we will head in that direction. The great coin has already spoken," he mentioned with a chuckle, palming the silver coin.

"Understandable," Riley said before glancing at Emma.

The light mage looked down at her hands and then back up at Riley. "I'm still sorry for what I did," she said quietly. "I was wrong."

"It's alright," Riley said, surprised that she no longer felt as angry with the girl as she had been. It seemed sort of petty after everything that had happened. After her induction into the sisterhood and her last encounter with the Clarence-creature she just felt... different.

"We all make mistakes – myself included," Riley added softly. Then she offered a hand. "Take care of yourself, Emma." The light mage looked at her in relief and gripped her arm firmly.

The group bid her goodbye, and soon only Riley and Cecil were standing in the chamber. The fire mages soon returned with their equipment. Riley accepted the bundle, re-equipping her armor and daggers. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that her bow was resting among the equipment. As she looked through the package, she also found the torn and tattered remains of Marie's leather armor, the familiar red material embroidered along the seams. She traced it with her fingers.

"You could repair it," Cecil said gruffly, watching her. "It's what Marie would have wanted anyway. You carry her legacy – and Lily's."

Riley was surprised at the enchanter's almost-kind words, especially after she had gotten him exiled. "Maybe I should," she replied. She sighed softly, returning her attention back to Cecil. "So what are *your* plans?"

"Oh me? Well, I'm broke and penniless – because of you, I might point out. I thought, maybe I'd beg on the side of the road... Or try to steal some stuff on my way out of town. I briefly considered blowing up my shop. Just to stick it to those uptight mages." A nearby fire mage glanced at the enchanter in alarm.

Riley laughed. She could tell Cecil was dead serious. "That seems a bit extreme. They also might not let you go if you keep destroying parts of the city."

Then she hesitated, tapping her lips as she watched the little man. He had pouches strapped to his body that were undoubtedly filled with magic crystals, and he had owned a shop full of magical equipment. She couldn't deny how useful his crystals could be. They also had an entire crafting school back in the Twilight Throne that was still in need of a headmaster. She had no idea if Jason would approve of the enchanter, but it was worth a shot.

"Maybe I could offer you a job," Riley suggested. "Assuming you pass the interview, of course."

"What kind of job?" Cecil asked suspiciously as the pair stepped out of the antechamber and headed for the exit.

Riley offered him a lopsided smile. "The kind with lots of explosions. And death. And mayhem. In short, the best kind of job for a man of your talents. On a completely unrelated note, have you ever considered teaching for a living?"

## Chapter 29 - Confronted

Riley slammed her locker shut, hefting her bag over her shoulder. Her free hand rubbed at her neck as she made her way toward a side entrance to the school. It had been a long day. Classes had ended some time ago, and the halls were deserted. Riley had needed to stay late to make up a test she had missed earlier in the week thanks to her leg injury. Afterwards, she had decided to knock out some homework in the library. She had spent nearly every free moment in AO that week and was way behind on her schoolwork.

As she made it to the door, Riley tapped the Core on her wrist, and a translucent keyboard appearing along her arm. Her fingers danced along the keys as she stepped onto the sidewalk outside. Her breath made small puffs of vapor in the chill air. The trees dotting the campus rustled gently in the breeze, waning sunlight trickling through their branches.

*If the car gets here in the next few minutes, I could probably make it home for dinner.*

Unfortunately, Riley was staring at her Core instead of paying attention to her surroundings. Someone suddenly grabbed her bag from her shoulder. She looked up in alarm and saw Carrie's familiar sneering face. Glancing to either side, Riley realized that three other girls stood around her. She could feel her stomach sink with dread. Nothing good could come of this.

"Hello there, slut," Carrie said, practically spitting out the slur. "You made us wait. We've been standing out here in the cold for *hours*." The girl glanced at her friends, their faces stony and impassive.

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you," Riley replied, her eyes drifting to the ground as she struggled to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

Out of the corner of her eye, she was examining the school building. She didn't notice any cameras – which was part of Richmond's silly no surveillance policy. She was beginning to realize that the parents had likely pushed this. Who wanted to have their spoiled children inadvertently caught on camera committing a crime or doing something embarrassing?

"Not as sorry as you're going to be," Carrie said. "You should have taken the demonstration in the cafeteria for what it was – a message that no one wants you here."

"What's your problem with me?" Riley demanded, frustration tinging her voice.

*What am I going to do?* It was four on one, and these girls

weren't likely to let her go. She could only think to buy herself some time. Maybe a teacher had stayed late, but that seemed like a longshot since the campus around her appeared deserted.

Carrie put a hand to her chest. "Me? I have absolutely no problem with you. However, you insulted the wrong person. Alex sends his regards by the way."

Riley looked up at the girl in surprise, noticing her lip curl in a sneer as she folded her arms. The events over the last few weeks suddenly made a lot more sense. Spreading rumors and teasing was one thing, but Carrie had been gunning for her relentlessly. If Alex were pressuring her – or bribing her – then that would explain her *dedication*.

"Then what is it you want?" Riley finally asked.

"Oh, nothing much. Alex simply wants you to leave." Carrie glanced at the other girls around her. "Other than that, our instructions were to make you suffer. He told us to be creative."

Carrie advanced slowly toward Riley, and she could hear the other girls approaching from behind her. Riley's heart beat frantically in her chest. She would have given anything at that moment to be able to channel her dark mana – to feel the familiar weight of her armor on her shoulders and her daggers at her waist. She tried to channel the confidence she had felt with the Council, but it abandoned her.

"Since you ignored our message in the cafeteria, perhaps we will have to be more direct," Carrie continued. The girl's arm lashed forward, her palm smacking Riley hard across the face. She could feel the sting across her cheek – the sensation sharper than the pain she experienced in-game.

Carrie laughed. "What? Are you not even going to fight back? I thought you had a little more spirit in you. It looks like we won't even have to hold you down." Another blow rocked Riley's head, her cheek throbbing painfully.

Inside she just felt hollow. As the next blow came, her thoughts turned to the conversation with her parents – how they had urged her to fight back. Lily had said the same thing. She remembered the pledge she had made to her newfound sisters. What had the words been? To never waver and to never balk?

What was so different about this world that she felt chained down and powerless?

Inside the game, she took what she wanted without fear or restraint.

If that was the case, why couldn't she do the same here? The question rang through her mind with an odd sense of clarity. Why couldn't she? How was this really different? Her whole perspective shifted, and an odd sense of calm overcame her. Riley looked up at the

girls around her, viewing them as she would inside the game – enemies to be defeated.

As Carrie's hand whipped forward again, Riley caught her arm. The movement seemed natural, like the type of block she would use in-game. Maybe this really wasn't any different. She looked up at Carrie, noticing confusion wrinkling her brow as she tugged at her arm.

"What do you think you're doing?" Carrie demanded.

Before the girl could react, Riley moved. She shifted her weight and lunged forward, punching the girl in the stomach with her free hand. Hard. Carrie doubled over coughing as the other girls moved toward Riley. She automatically ducked one girl's blow, just like she had dodged the attacks of Jerry's training dummy, lashing out with her foot at the girl's knee. As the girl toppled with a scream of pain, Riley's leg collided a second time with her head. She abruptly stopped moving.

Another girl grabbed her from behind, and Riley twisted, clutching her opponent's shirt and side stepping neatly. She used the girl's momentum to swing her into her friend, causing the two girls to collide. Riley didn't hesitate. She approached the pair with a steady step, her knuckles immediately colliding with one girl's face. There was a crunch, and she fell to the ground. Her friend backpedaled away, looking at Riley with fearful eyes.

"I..."

She never managed to finish her sentence. Riley's foot lashed out, planting itself firmly in her stomach. The air evacuated the girl's lungs in a rush as she fell to the ground gasping. The next blow knocked her unconscious.

Riley stood on the sidewalk, looking at the four girls on the ground around her in surprise. The scene was surreal, and she half expected to see system notifications in the corner of her eye. Through it all, she felt oddly calm. No guilt clouded her mind. Only wonder at how easy that had been. Had her training inside the game begun to bleed over into the real world? It certainly seemed like it.

"Fuck you," someone whispered behind her. Riley turned, discovering that Carrie was beginning to stand back up, glowering at her as she held her stomach. "You are going to regret this."

Riley knew what she had to do. She had seen Jason do it in-game. Even her mother had pushed her to take this next step. She needed to send a message to the others. She needed to make certain this would *never* happen again. Human psychology didn't change – inside AO or out.

She strode over to Carrie, grasping her hair and lifting her face to meet hers. The smirk was gone, and the girl's eyes were wide and

frightened.

“There are no cameras here and no witnesses, which is why you chose this spot,” Riley said coldly. “No one is going to believe that I took down all four of you alone. You have nothing. Absolutely nothing on me.”

Riley wrenched the girl’s hair, watching her wince. “If you ever fuck with me again. I will do worse to you. That goes for anyone else Alex sends after me. I’m here to fucking stay, and he better get used to it.

“Spread the word.”

Then Riley’s fist collided with the girl’s face. Carrie dropped back to the concrete unconscious. Looking at the girls on the ground, Riley decided she needed to get out of there. She could see the headlights of her driverless car pulling into the nearby circle drive. Moving quickly, she grabbed her bag from the ground and jogged to the car.

A moment later, the car door slammed shut, and Riley was staring out the window at the schoolyard. She could just make out the shadows of the girls as they pushed themselves slowly from the ground. She massaged the knuckles of her right hand. They throbbed painfully and already showed the beginning signs of bruises. She hadn’t realized punching someone would hurt so much. It didn’t feel that way inside AO.

She hesitated, remembering an offhanded comment Melissa had made. She had said that everything was a game and that some people just didn’t know that they were playing. If so, then Riley sure as hell hadn’t been playing in her real life. Her eyes hardened as she stared out the window at the passing buildings, her hand clenching into a fist despite the pain that radiated from her knuckles.

That was going to change from this point forward. Riley would make sure of it. She was a Fury in-game or out, and she would make them realize that.

# Epilogue

That evening after dinner, Riley stepped into her bedroom. The lights immediately flickered on as the house sensors registered the presence of her Core. Her parents had acted oddly during the meal, noticing a change in her. However, they hadn't said anything about the growing bruises on her knuckles or the cuts on her cheek where Carrie's nails had scratched her. Her father had only patted her on the shoulder on his way to the kitchen, and her mother offered her some ice cream for dessert.

She padded softly to her bed, lifting the heavy plastic helmet that rested on her blankets. Her fingers ran lightly across the surface of the helmet as she sat down, and her thoughts drifted back over the events of the last few days.

Shaking her head, Riley lifted the helmet onto her head. A moment later she was sitting beside a campfire back within the radius of the Twilight Throne's influence. Cecil lay on a pallet beside her, snoring loudly. With her *Night Vision*, she could make out the forms of the undead soldiers standing guard around the makeshift campsite. She had requested that Frank send a division once she neared the kingdom's border.

A rogue dropped from stealth nearby. "Ma'am, there have been no issues while you were away. We stand ready at your command."

Riley nodded, her eyes on the campfire. "Continue to maintain your sentry positions. We will remain here until morning. Cecil could use the rest," she added, eyeing the enchanter. "I just want to attend to a few things."

"Of course," the undead rogue said, backing away and quickly vanishing into the forest.

Riley tapped her lips with her fingers as she stared at the flames in front of her. As her thoughts drifted, she noticed a few notifications flashing in her peripheral vision. In their haste to leave Vaerwald, she had forgotten to check her system prompts.

As she tapped the notification menu, a cascade of notices greeted her. She skimmed through the notifications, seeing that she had leveled five times and she had received various skill increases. Sighing, she swiped the windows away and opened her Character Status screen.



Character Status			
<b>Name:</b>	Riley	<b>Gender:</b>	Female
<b>Level:</b>	122	<b>Class:</b>	Fury (Erinyes)
<b>Race:</b>	Human	<b>Alignment:</b>	Lawful-Evil
<b>Fame:</b>	0	<b>Infamy:</b>	4600
<b>Health:</b>	3758	<b>H-Regen/Sec:</b>	9.55
<b>Mana:</b>	0	<b>M-Regen/Sec:</b>	1.00
<b>Stamina</b>	1510	<b>S-Regen/Sec:</b>	9.00
<b>Strength:</b>	135	<b>Dexterity:</b>	381
<b>Vitality:</b>	195	<b>Endurance:</b>	90
<b>Intelligence:</b>	10	<b>Willpower:</b>	10

Affinities			
<b>Dark:</b>	34%	<b>Light:</b>	7%
<b>Fire:</b>	12%	<b>Water:</b>	4%
<b>Air:</b>	4%	<b>Earth:</b>	4%

Her new class was interesting. All of her mana had been transferred to her health pool, giving her an incredible number of hit points. However, some experimenting showed that all of her spells now cost health to cast. Since the cost of her *Marked for Death* ability effectively neutralized her natural health regeneration, this might be as large a handicap as it was an advantage.

Riley pulled Lily's bow from her shoulder. Her fingers traced the petals of the crystalline roses. She now knew whose heartbeat throbbed within the petals. Lily was standing watch over her. With a thought, she brought up the information on the bow.

### **Vendetta**

This weapon was created by a talented enchanter out of desperation and anger. This bow has seen lives taken in the name of vengeance – and it never forgets.

**Quality:** A

**Damage:** 40-95 (Pierce)

**Durability:** 99/100

+ 20 Strength

+ 20 Dexterity

+ 30 Vitality  
(Soulbound)

### Special Ability Unlocked

Unlocks the ability, *Vindication*, which sacrifices the user's health to overcharge an ability. The damage of skills and spells is increased by 10%/second while this ability is channeled.

**Cost:** 300 Health/Sec

**Cooldown:** 15 minutes

Riley's eyes hovered on the special ability. She had known that something happened in her earlier battle against the Prefect and this finally explained it. It was an interesting ability, although it seemed to carry substantial risk. What happened if her health hit zero while she was channeling the skill? Would she die?

Her gaze moved back to her status window. Given her new abilities and the health cost of casting spells, *Vitality* was now critical. After thinking about it for a few moments, she placed her available points into *Vitality*, increasing her health by over three hundred points. She might need to continue to divide her points between *Vitality* and *Dexterity* from now on. She suspected that this was what Marie had done. She was still something similar to an assassin or an archer, and not a frontline fighter. Yet she could already see impressive support potential with her health transfer and drain abilities. She would have to talk to Jason.

Thinking of her missing Necromancer, Riley pulled up her chat window. She wondered if Frank had ended up going over to Jason's aunt's house. He hadn't said anything. Thankfully, Frank chose that moment to come online, and she shot him a quick message. She heard the ding of a response only a few seconds later.

**Frank:** Riley, I got your message. I think we need to talk. I've been trying to call you for the last few minutes and figured you must be online when you didn't answer.

**Riley:** Yeah, I just logged on a little while ago. What's the matter? Did you get in touch with Jason?

**Frank:** That's just it. I went to his house. Well, there was police tape up everywhere. The police saw my Core show up at the

house and detained me for questioning. They just released me a couple of hours ago. Something terrible has happened.

**Riley:** What? What are you talking about? Police? Is Jason okay?

**Frank:** I'm not really sure how to explain. I think it would be easier if I just showed you the news coverage. Here, I'll send it over the chat.

Riley's UI dinged a moment later, signaling that a file had arrived. Her finger hovered over the screen in front of her while her stomach churned. After being attacked by Carrie's group outside of her school, she could only imagine what might have happened to Jason. Alex seemed to be getting more aggressive.

Closing her eyes, she pressed the file.

A new screen appeared in the air before her, showing video footage from the perspective of an aerial news drone. It was night-time and the view hovered beside what she assumed was Jason's house, spotlights shining down on the street. Police vehicles ringed the house, their lights flashing an alternating blue and red.

"We are outside a home in Highland Park registered to Angie Pogue," a newscaster's voice said over the video footage. "It appears that the suspect is a young man, approximately eighteen years old."

Riley could feel her heartbeat speed up at the report. Was that Alex? "The police haven't yet provided a formal report, but, from what we can tell, two teenagers have died in a possible double homicide...."

"Wait, the suspect is being taken out of the house now." The video shifted to follow a young man being lead through the front door. His hands were cuffed behind his back, and two officers flanked him, their faces obscured by tactical helmets.

The drone's camera zoomed in on the teenager's face, and Riley gasped, her hand covering her mouth. Within seconds, a school photograph of Jason appeared in the corner of the video.

"It appears that the suspect is Jason Rhodes, a former student at Richmond High School. His record indicates that he was an honors student and recently left the school for an unknown disciplinary issue. We will provide more information as this story unfolds."

Riley tapped the video again, the image freezing on a zoomed-

in photo of Jason's face as he was leaving the house. His eyes looked confused and frightened – not the gaze of a killer. She knew him better than that. At least she thought she did. Her fingers drifted toward the screen, passing through the translucent surface as tears budded in her eyes.

What was going on?

**The End**

# Thank you for reading!

I hope you enjoyed the story! You can find a link to the next book in the series, AO: Evolution, [here](#)!

## Please leave a review!

I can't overstate how important these reviews are to making sure other people get a chance to read my story. I would also love to hear your thoughts - positive, negative or anything in between.

Please feel free to email me directly at [tbagwell33@gmail.com](mailto:tbagwell33@gmail.com) if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions. If you see any errors, please let me know and I will fix them immediately!

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